



Ministerial Councils and Australian School Education: Cooperative federalism and the progressive years (1919-39)

Grant Rodwell[†]

*Faculty of Education
University of Tasmania*

During period 1919-39 through rather passive and uncontroversial means under the banner of cooperative federalism the Commonwealth instituted some major and long-lasting school educational policy. During this period it was generally acknowledged that the Commonwealth should eschew involvement in school education, yet, the politics of the time, with the additional imperatives of the dominant zeitgeist, drove Commonwealth involvement in school education through ministerial councils.

Introduction

Despite the Constitution expressly excluding the Commonwealth from engaging with state school education, how and by what stages did it manage to do so in the long history of federation? Today the Commonwealth touches the school life of every student from the beginning of schooling through to university.

As Pyvis (2006) shows soon after the founding of the Commonwealth it had commenced its role in school education in the form of compulsory school cadets. The program ran through until 1929, until financial stringencies of the Great Depression brought the program to an end. Now, the Commonwealth became more interested in national fitness for Australia's youth, although this also had been a part of the old pre-war discourse. Again, schools

[†]Address for correspondence: Grant Rodwell, Faculty of Education, the University of Tasmania. Email: grant.rodwell@utas.edu.au.

would be a very convenient starting point for this, and the cooperation of the states would be vital. How could this federal intervention be achieved?

The answer came with the Commonwealth through ministerial councils working with state bureaucracies and reaching out to schools. The Commonwealth would supply the ideas and research, and some money, but through their bureaucracies and schools the states would furnish the remainder.

This paper argues for federalism to allow for the developments in school education during the period it was dependent on political circumstances and a *zeitgeist* conducive to the changes being acceptable by the states. Without the financial and political leverage resulting from acquiring income tax in 1942, during the pre-war years the Commonwealth was committed to the belief that federalism provided no legal conditions or political motivation to interfere directly with school education. The compulsory clauses of the school cadet program had been through the Defence Act (1903). There is no evidence from the Commonwealth parliamentary discourse that the government seriously entertained any idea of returning to compulsory school cadets. There were other less expensive options, and options that appealed to the eugenic-inspired ideals of national fitness. Thus, there is the problem of the perceived need for national fitness, a possible political opportunity within the boundaries of conservative governments and perceived federalist frameworks. For the Commonwealth, there was no other legal access to the nation's schools.

The horrors of Gallipoli and Flanders had dented severely the old militarist *zeitgeist* of the pre-war epoch. Despite the antics of some fringe far-right militarist groups such as the New Guard, Australia was retreating from nationalism and militarism, but not from a drive for national fitness. Increasingly, this had captured the attention of professionals — including medical doctors, researchers and educationalist. National fitness required government intervention, and with compulsory school attendance schools were a convenient

starting point. Within the mindset of cooperative federalism of the conservative federal governments, ministerial councils could achieve much.

In examining how this might be achieved we first need to look to the notion of cooperative federalism — the dominant form of federalism during the period which permitted a prescribed form of Commonwealth involvement in school education; then the looming *zeitgeist* of the interwar years; then to the political dynamics of inter-war governments; finally, the manifestations through ministerial councils of these two elements.

Cooperative Federalism

The University of New South Wales Centre of Public Law defines cooperative federalism as ‘the sharing of law-making powers between the Commonwealth and state governments ... both tiers of government ... work[ing] together to achieve good policy outcomes. This approach to governance ... can be seen in a range of policy areas, including health, education and rivers management’ (UNSW, n.d., n.p.).

The Great War had brought unimaginable pressures on the Commonwealth, accompanied by massive expansions of Commonwealth powers through defence imperatives. After the war, conservative Commonwealth governments attempted to return to a system of co-ordinate federalism. However, the Australian Commonwealth faced other imperatives. Under conservative governments, a system of cooperative federalism developed in the 1920s and 1930s in response to both internal and external pressures. Outcomes of cooperative federalism included: the establishment of the Australian Loan Council in response to intergovernmental competition in the loan markets; the co-ordination of economic management and budgetary policies during the Great Depression; and the establishment of joint consultative bodies, usually in the form of ministerial councils (UNSW, n.d., n.p.).

This was the dominant form of federalism during the inter-war period. In response to national imperatives during the period — usually expressed by historians as a quest for national efficiency and fitness (Roe, 1984). In regard to federal leverage on school education it meant the establishment of federal ministerial councils whereby under cooperative arrangements programs were provided for the states and territories, examples being the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), the National Fitness Council (NFC) and the Australian Education Council (AEC).

These ministerial councils brought long-term major influences on Australian school education. The NHMRC was instrumental in beginning the medicalization of the Australian school curriculum during the inter-war period, in respect to early childhood education, primary education and aspects of secondary education, in particular physical education and domestic science for adolescent girls. The ACER spearheaded psychological testing which was a mainstay of the influence of scientific management on school education. The NFC also assisted in the medicalization of the states' physical education curricular, and generally provided leadership in establishing the professionalization of physical education as a discipline. The AEC also has relevance for this paper. Now carrying the nomenclature of Education Council, following the Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood (SCSEEC), the AEC is a forum comprising federal and state Ministers of Education assisted by a standing committee of Directors of Education. The chair rotates annually. To the extent that this group pool their powers and act in a concerted manner to dominate direction setting in education, they constitute an oligarchy (Rodwell, 1998a, chap. 4). There were, however, other socio-cultural *zeitgeist* affecting this increased involvement.

***Zeitgeist: the panic of the perceived Bolshevik ogre;
paranoia about the Japanese***

Similar to more recent twenty-first century national media-manufactured panics such as that associated with boat-arrival refugees, the national panic in Australia surrounding the Bolshevik Revolution was echoed in the press and radio. A notable immediate response to Red October and the Bolshevik Revolution a few months later was how Australian school education took an immediate stance, linking arms with democratic/capitalist systems and values.

For example, at the July 1919 conference of the Tasmanian Teachers Union held in Launceston, delegates resolved that the Department of Education should maintain and extend its commitment to the further establishment of school and civic playgrounds. With the Armistice only months behind them, in its editorial responding to the 1919 Tasmanian Teachers Union conference, *The Mercury* reminded the Tasmanian public that the English-speaking races were characterised by an inborn love of sport, and had played a mighty role in the overthrow of militarism in Europe. The Hobart daily also stated that the nations practising collective disciplinary sports and pastimes, and in which personal initiative combined with organised movement were responsible for conquering the Germans, whose recreations had mainly been mechanical and gymnastic in style. After the war both state and private schools increased the size of their sports fields. Team sport activities in schools greatly increased. This was paralleled by a decrease in the advocacy of special playground equipment (*Mercury*, 1919a, 17 March).

The end of the Great War intensified the influence on the various Australian playground associations. As with its counterparts in England and the United States, eugenic links with the town planning movement strengthened. While civic playgrounds gradually grew in number, the idea of supervised playgrounds failed to develop. For example, in Victoria by 1927 there were seventy-two equipped

playgrounds throughout the state, but only five had play leaders. Certainly, the stringent economic conditions of the 1930s interrupted the progress of the provision of playgrounds. In a series of articles in the early issues of *Australian Childhood* during 1930, the pioneering early childhood educator, Martha Simpson, decried the lack civic pride and foresight by civic authorities and the population-at-large in neglecting their responsibilities in this regard, despite the many overseas examples cited by her, children's access to playgrounds in Australia, for many decades to come, was limited to what school and civic authorities saw fit to provide. It was only during the late 1930s, through the injection of Commonwealth funds through the CNF, that civic playgrounds received national consideration, and Commonwealth funding. Consequently, in his lectures to his students at the University of Sydney's School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, Professor Harvey Sutton rejoiced at these developments and related them to the imperatives of race motherhood, and the fight against delinquency (Rodwell, 1998b; 2000).

In reviewing the achievement of the 1919 annual Tasmanian Teachers' Union conference, in a lengthy editorial *The Mercury* described the most important role of schools and school playgrounds in post-war reconstruction:

We cannot afford, no Australian State can afford, to have our schools converted into agencies for making Bolsheviks or citizens of any other class that will be prejudicial to the best interests of Australia. All over the world this question of the fruit to be borne by the trees we plant is being looked at in a different way from ever before. Who does not realise in his or her own case the extreme and lifelong importance of the impressions made upon the mind in the early years. If we want people to grow up in our country to give us trouble in the future, citizens who will be anti-Australian, anti-British, anti-religious, anti-moral, anti-industrious, insubordinate, querulous, unsteady, lazy, violent, reckless, led by extremists, led by people who hypnotise them or govern them through ignorant fears and silly theories that happiness

is always to be in the next world and not this (*Mercury*, 1919b).

There were deep underpinning anxieties of the period, often expressed in the media as exemplified above, and often in popular culture and literature. Witness C.J. Dennis in 1934:

Show me the greedy, grasping, soulless capitalist or the blatant, brother-hating bolshevik who was reared and nurtured in a garden rich with flowers — and I shall make ready to deny my philosophy. ('Den' [C.J. Dennis], 1934).

This anti-Bolshevism pervaded Australian public discourse for the inter-war period, until it was eclipsed by a paranoia concerning Japan during the late 1930s (Evans, 1992). Meaney's (1996) study of Commonwealth intelligence expert's work on researching and managing Australia's relationship with Japan during the inter-war period highlights the 'fears and phobias' of the Australian population towards Japan particularly during the late 1930s. Meaney (1996) notes how 'Britain and the British Commonwealth were being confronted by the Fascist powers in Europe at the very time they were being estranged from Japan in the Pacific' (p. 37). Consequently,

The new international circumstances revived the alarms which had dominated Australia's defence planning in the decade prior to World War One. The British Empire had to contemplate the possibility of being engaged in a war on two fronts, in Europe and the Far East, and in this case Australia would be unable to rely on the assistance of the Royal Navy for its protection. ... Australia's danger was now much greater than in the earlier period. Since World War One Britain's power had declined relative to that of Japan, imperialists had greater influence over the Japanese government, the United States was determinedly isolationist and there was no longer an Anglo-Japanese alliance. Australia therefore had no choice but to look to its own resources for its

salvation (pp. 37-38).

On the home front, however, the media and the government were making full play with propaganda to ‘manage’ this paranoia. Jacqui Murray (2004) shows how the Australian media, now making full use of radio, manufactured news about Japanese/Australia relationships.

It is questionably whether the Australian media representation of Japan from 1931 to the fall of Singapore in February 1942 served Australian public interest. In brief, Murray (2004) concludes through what purported to be news, but in fact was little more than propaganda, ‘the media had betrayed the Australian people and the national interest, through cynicism, alcoholic journalists who knew little about China and Japan, poorly qualified correspondents with a lack of foreign experience, and Australia’s dependence on overseas sources — particularly Japanese and even Nazi German sources’ (Kolb, 2006, n.p.).

Zeitgeist: progressivism

Developing militarism and a gradual acceptance that Australia’s reliance on British hegemony in Asia may be on the wane meant the big ideas dominating Australia were changing during the 1930s. This, however, was not the only factors leading to a new *zeitgeist*. In 1984 Michael Roe’s landmark study of the influence of progressivism, or vitalism, on Australia’s socio-political thought was published. At the core of progressivism were the efficiency dynamic and an increase in government control to ensure this efficiency — at all three levels of government. Efficiency required research and coordinated action, and the nurturing of professional elites.

Roe’s (1984) Introduction to his study of nine Australian progressives attempts a summary of the principal features of this ‘new consciousness’ influencing the Australian social planners of the mid-war years:

Efficiency became the touchstone of all things. Progressives, true to Nietzsche-Bergson-James, repudiated all notions of fixed and determinist systems of knowledge. But they were emphatic (some of them, fanatic) in their confidence in applied learning. Not only science in the specific sense, but any and every aspect of scholarship and enquiry could only justify itself through capacity for problem solving. The way to this was itself 'scientific': Progressives were ardent collectors of data concerning natural and human phenomena. Thence must come guides for effective action, to be pursued by bureaucratic and other elites (p. 11).

Progressives urged governments for ever-increasing interference in policy development. Where necessary, the Commonwealth needed to interfere in state activities — wherever the limits of federalism permitted it to do so. Often national efficiency embodied eugenic ideals. Roe's study immediately gave rise to a host of other works in a like vein, including Garton (1986a; 1986b; 1994) and Reiger (1984).

The Great Depressions and the political dynamics of inter-war governments

The Great Depression dominated Australian society, economy and politics in ways that few people hitherto could have imagined. There had been relative optimism with the sustained economic growth of the immediate post-war construction years. This was an epoch dominated by conservative governments in Canberra. The Nationalist Prime Minister, Billy Hughes, ushered in this period (1917-23) prior to the onset of the Great Depression (Fitzhardinge, 1983).

Stanley Melbourne Bruce, 1st Viscount Bruce of Melbourne, from the Nationalist Coalition was in office from 1923-29. He brought a touch of British aristocracy to Australia political life. He made wide-ranging reforms and mounted a comprehensive nation-

building program in government, but his controversial handling of industrial relations led to his dramatic defeat at the polls in 1929 (Radi, 1979).

In office Bruce pursued an energetic and diverse agenda, strengthening Commonwealth imperatives. His establishment of ministerial councils is at the crux of this paper. He established the Loans Council (1923), the Advisory Council of Science and Industry (1926), the forerunners of the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO). Also of relevance to this chapter is his establishment in 1926 of the Federal Health Council — the precursor to the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) — following a Royal Commission's recommendations. Membership of the Council then consisted of the Commonwealth Director General of Health and the Chief Health Officer of each State (Radi, 1979).

Labor's James Scullin, Prime Minister during the period 1929-32 had the misfortune of being in office at the time of the onset of the Great Depression, only weeks after coming to office. The rapid international onset of the Great Depression drastically impacted on heavily indebted Australia. Scullin and his Treasurer, Ted Theodore, responded by developing several plans during 1930 and 1931 to repay foreign debt, provide relief to farmers and create economic stimulus to curb unemployment based on deficit spending and expansionary monetary policy. The Senate abruptly locked these plans (Robertson, 1988).

Scullin, however, was able to establish the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). Influential was the Carnegie Corporation, a US organisation created in 1911 to promote knowledge and understanding to safeguard capitalist societies, provided grants to benefit the people of the United States. Some Carnegie funds could be used for the same purpose in countries that were, or had been, members of the British Commonwealth. At the time of the Great Depression many policy makers perceived that Australia was under threat from Bolshevism. The grant to establish

ACER was made following a visit to Australia by American James Russell on behalf of the Carnegie Corporation in order to assess the state of education in Australia and investigate appropriate means of assistance (Williams, 1994; Robinson, 1988).

With the prospect of his government facing bankruptcy, Scullin advanced the Premiers' Plan, a conservative measure meeting the crisis with severe cutbacks in government spending. Again, in response Labor fed on itself. The cuts severely affected pensioners and other core Labor constituencies, leading to a widespread revolt and multiple defections in parliament. Labor again showed its lemming-like capacity, and after several months of infighting the government collapsed and the newly formed United Australia Party (UAP) under the Tasmanian ex-school teacher, Joseph Lyons, took power at the subsequent 1931 election. A devout Catholic, Lyons had 'ratted' on his earlier commitment to Labor, the party which brought him to political prominence (Hart & Lloyd, 1986).

The new party was basically the Nationalist Party under a new name, and Lyons was chosen as leader of the party. With his Labor background and his Catholic Nationalists believed he could win traditional Labor support groups — working-class voters and Irish Catholics — over to the new party (Hart & Lloyd, 1986).

Federal Labor, however, soon was to complete yet more self-destruction. In March, at about the same time as Lyons led his group of defectors from the right of the Labor Party across the floor, five left-wing New South Wales Labor MPs, supporters of New South Wales Premier Jack Lang, also split from the official Labor Party over the government's economic policies, forming a 'Lang Labor' group on the cross-benches and costing the government its majority in the House of Representatives. Late in the year, the Langite MPs supported a UAP no-confidence motion and brought the government down, forcing an early election (Hart & Lloyd, 1986).

At the 1931 election, Lyons and the UAP offered stable, orthodox financial policies, and portrayed an image of putting national unity

above class conflict. Lyons had a trustworthy persona, often portrayed as a teddy bear by the nation's cartoonists. He was a working-class man leading a party comprising largely middle- and upper-class conservatives, while Labor remained split between the official party and the Langites. The result was a huge victory for the UAP, which took thirty-four seats against eighteen seats for the two wings of the Labor Party combined. With a more settled economy and political climate, the Lyons Coalition Government established another ministerial council — the Australian Education Council (AEC) in 1936 (Hart & Lloyd, 1986). There was sufficient political support and momentum here to warrant Commonwealth leverage on school education, all under the banner of cooperative federalism.

The first meeting of the new NHMRC was held in February 1937 and *inter alia* was instrumental in establishing the national capital network of Lady Gowrie schools whose presence lives on into the twenty-first century. With Lyons' death, Sir Earle Page from the Country Party, and soon after Robert Menzies from the UAP took the prime ministership. During this time the National Fitness Council was established, representing another Commonwealth incursion into school education.

The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC)

Strengthening Australia's physical fitness is a common theme and aspiration of this period, and none more fascinating than the history of Health Weeks, and annual event in all Australian capital cities. Schools often played central roles in these spectacles aimed at public education (Rodwell, 1999). Through Australian schools and working through state departments of health, the Commonwealth could do much to encourage an improved physical fitness amongst Australian youth.

Established in 1926, the NHMRC was one such Commonwealth ministerial council having a direct influence on state-controlled school education. Through state departments of health, the

NHMRC introduced physical culture in schools through Health Week displays (Rodwell, 1999), albeit not in any systematic manner. But there were other opportunities for a more focussed emphasis on physical fitness.

Following the Great War, the eugenic ideals and practices of the English nursery schools, founded by Rachel and Margaret McMillan, became manifest in Australia. Open-air education, diet, systematic measurement of children's physical and psychological development, were all hallmarks of the nursery school system, a system which the Commonwealth sponsored for Australian families (Stevinson, 1923; de Lissa, 1939). Moreover, mothers were expected to change their child-rearing practices according to these developments. An early example was developments at the Blackfriars Infant Demonstration School, Sydney. Here an 'experiment in health education' was begun during February 1921. The aim was to enable the school to be an agent in the improvement of children's health (Rodwell, 1998, chap. 3).

Similarly, the Commonwealth Department of Health influenced early childhood education through the Lady Gowrie Child Centres, modelled on the Blackfriars experiment, one of which was opened in each of Australia's capital cities in 1940. The centres were designed as lighthouses for Australian early childhood education, and were liberally staffed with a team of professionals employed part-time and full-time, which included teachers, a nurse and a social worker. These professionals worked together in child study, a central purpose of the institutions. Within the Commonwealth Department of Health, Christine Heinig was the executive officer responsible for the centres (Rodwell, 1998, chap. 3).

Heinig's 1944 report on the Lady Gowrie Centres describes at great length the architecture of the buildings. This was an architecture facilitating surveillance of the children by the team of professionals working there. The children's behaviour, habits and development were observed and recorded on most elaborate charts, which included such attributes as 'honesty of thought', 'honesty towards

ourselves’, and ‘honesty and character traits. Children’s physical development and health were measured and recorded regularly (Heinig, 1939).

In a vein similar to the manner in which the Australian family was modernised during the inter-war period as described by Reiger (1984), the Commonwealth Lady Gowrie Centres similarly exerted an influence on Australian schooling. Now, early childhood education was being medicalised and modernised through the lighthouse influences of the Lady Gowrie Centres. Since their founding the Lady Gowrie Centres have grown in number. For example, in 2015 Tasmania has thirteen centres offering a variety of early childhood services.

1930 ACER

The growth in the application of psychology as an instrument of educational management in Australia’s department of education came with the foundation of the ACER. With Dr Kenneth Cunningham as Director, backed by Carnegie Corporation funds, the institution quickly threw its weight behind the assumption that those children ‘best fitted’ to receive the scarce resources of state-provided secondary education should do so (Haller, 1963, pp. 123, 129). The Carnegie Corporation had already established a strong record in supporting eugenic endeavours and anti-Bolshevik programs, such as public libraries in the United States and elsewhere. Cunningham led the ACER off on a massive program of ability test compilation for Australian state schools.

Politicians and policy makers have long used the ACER as an instrument to achieve their ends. For example, in June 2011, Christopher Pyne, Opposition Education spokesperson on education in the House of Representatives quoted the ACER at least twice in advancing an argument against a national senior secondary certificate (Commonwealth of Australia, House of Reps, 2011, p. 6294).

During the early 1930s, with the establishment of the state institutes of educational research that operated under the auspices of the ACER, and through the ACER program of secondment of teachers from state Departments of Education, Cunningham was able to sponsor a culture of testing and educational research in the Australian states. With his appointment in 1935 to the newly established position of Research Officer for the New South Wales Department of Education, Harold Wyndham spearheaded the ability testing movement in that state (Barcan, 1988, p. 218).

Through the 1930s until the 1960s most Australian primary schools were organised according to children's intellectual ability. On this basis children also were streamed into the secondary schools, with the selective high schools supplying the bulk of student teachers for the state teachers' colleges. As primary school children competed for the scarce resources of the selective high schools, and as these in turn competed for the scarce resources of teachers' colleges positions, intelligence became socially constructed from a middle-class perspective. In short, the ACER tests defined what was an intelligent adolescent, and who was worthy to sit for the matriculation or Leaving Certificate examination (McCallum, 1990, chaps 4, 5).

I have argued elsewhere this ability testing had a massive effect on Australian teacher selection and preparation and consequently, school education (Rodwell (2003). With the ACER's work on ability testing throughout Australian school education, before students ever received their high school principal's stamp of approval, gained their state-sponsored student-teachers' studentship and enrolled in a college, they had been through years of screening and sorting according to criteria established by the state through the ACER.

When Menzies (1961) made an observation concerning rural education at the second annual conference of the Australian College of Education, *inter alia*, he spoke on Commonwealth state relations in respect to education. Using metaphors drawn from physics,

Menzies claimed the Australian Federal Constitution was under a constant tension — between a movement to centralise federal control, which he labelled centripetal forces, and a movement away from the centre —back to the states and territories — labelling that as centrifugal (Menzies (1967). If the Commonwealth's influence over education in respect to the states and territories is any index, Menzies was wholly correct. National economic and defence imperatives were at stake and there were massive enrolment pressures on Australia's schools.

The ACER, however, also influenced other aspects of Australian schooling. Its influence also came on rural education. In 1961 Australia's economy continued to be based on pastoralism, and continued improvements in agriculture and pastoralism were vitally important. Despite education being a state province, the Commonwealth could do its bit. To illustrate his point, Menzies (1961), for example, used ACER-assisted Tasmanian Area Schools, established at Sheffield and Hagley during 1935 (Rodwell, 1998). Menzies (1961) claimed: 'when I first met them, years ago, I was much impressed (as I still am) by the Tasmanian Area Schools, with their special studies for boys who were going on the land. I saw great common sense in this' (p. 4).

By 2015 with its headquarters in Camberwell, Victoria, and with offices in Sydney, Brisbane, Perth, Adelaide Dubai and India and financially self-sufficient, born in an era of cooperative federalism, the ACER has exercised an expansive and long-term influence on many aspects of Australian schooling and education. It continues as a success story of the Commonwealth using its resources in a cooperative manner under the auspices the notion of a ministerial council to assist and guide states and territories in their systems of schooling and education (ACER: Corporate Profile, n.d.).

The National Fitness Council (NFC) (1938)

During the inter-war years, the Commonwealth sustained its influence on physical education in schools. It was instrumental in

1938 in the development of eugenic-inspired state programs to train specialist physical education teachers (Kirk & Twigg, 1994). The topic of the physical degeneration of school children prompted the Commonwealth Advisory Council of Nutrition through the Commonwealth Department of Health to conduct research on the physical condition of school children in rural New South Wales. This research was supported by research by Professor Harvey Sutton from the University of Sydney and a colleague from the University of Melbourne. The results of the research, which according to T.E. Hornibrook, later principal of North Sydney Boys' Technical High School — a selective school — writing in *Education* showed an 'appalling racial degeneration', with its 'pernicious effects being cumulative and ever-increasing' (Hornibrook, 1938, p. 231).

The journal *Education* reported the Commonwealth Minister for Health, Billy Hughes, as stating 'whatever steps are necessary to ensure conditions favourable to a virile and numerous population must be taken in hand without delay. We cannot afford to breed weaklings' (Hornibrook, 1938). The editor of *Education* was using this evidence as a part of a continuing campaign to induce the state government to give financial support to improve the health of rural children, and to improve educational facilities in these areas. Of course, in 1938 behind these eugenic statements concerning racial degeneration was a defence imperative. The political opportunity came early in the following year.

Lyons died in office in April 1939 four months before the outbreak of the war. Convened under imperatives of national fitness and defence, in 1939 the NFC had its first meeting and defined its objectives. Its primary role was to 'act as a co-ordinating agency to ensure the improvement of the state of individual physical fitness throughout Australia on a national basis', and to cooperate with governments at various levels and any state council for physical fitness for the education of public opinion in the need for physical fitness, and the general promotion of physical fitness in the community (Cunningham & Pratt, 1940, p. 37). This included

financial support for facilities. It would assist in the training of specialist physical education teachers.

The NFC did not overlook the connection between physical fitness and race motherhood. It sought to educate public opinion about ‘the part played in the building of the body by the adequate care and feeding of the expectant and nursing mother’; and ‘the high importance of right nutrition at all stages of growth and development’ (Cunningham & Pratt, 1940, p. 37). Along with various ministers representing the states in July 1939 the Council dispersed Commonwealth money. An amount of £1000 per annum for five years was voted to each state for the employment of an organiser and for incidental expenses. Amounts ranging from £1000 to £2000 were voted to each of Australia’s six universities for either scholarships or lectureships in physical education. A sum of £20,000 was left in the hands of the Commonwealth Minister for Health ‘for application in the Federal Territories and for other national purposes in connection with the campaign’ (Cunningham & Pratt, 1940, p. 38; also see *Advocate*, 1939).

These developments were reported into regional Australia. For example, the Burnie *Advocate* reported ‘the Australian Educational Council declared that ‘in community education’, useful and economical approach to the question might be made, among others, through:

- Education of the community to appreciate the need for physical education.
- Co-ordination and expansion of activities of organisations working in allied fields.
- Supplementation of the work of organisations.
- Provision of expert guidance, especially in matters of nutrition.
- Provision of competent instructors and supervisors’
Advocate, 1939)

Through necessities determined by an approaching war, the Commonwealth, *inter alia*, commenced support for the training of physical education teachers. The Council of Physical Education organisational arrangements in New South Wales comprised:

In September 1939 His Excellency the Governor with the advice of the Executive Council approved, as constituted, a State Council of Physical Fitness for New South Wales.

During 1940 the Council of Physical Fitness became known as the National Fitness Council of New South Wales, as a result of the Commonwealth National Fitness Bill. It has the provision that the National Fitness Council in each State would be the active agency to implement a policy of activities in the interests of the National Fitness Campaign throughout the Commonwealth (Council of Physical Education, 1939-1940).

The author of this paper attended a central school in the New South Wales Central Tablelands during the years 1949-1959, and there were never any provisions for physical education by specialist physical education teacher. Indeed, the closest the author came to physical education or physical culture lesson was watching the Sydney Health Week displays on the Movietone News at the local Saturday afternoon matinee. In a nearby regional city the high school, however, there were trained specialist physical education teachers. This statement is to demonstrate that the reach of the New South Wales Council of Physical Education did not extend to all New South Wales state schools. Additionally, in the city there was a supervised 'blue water' — chlorinated — public swimming pool.

During this period, however, in this small country town two small children's play centres — a corner block with a number of swings and roundabouts — appeared in the mid-1950s, provided by the local government through federal funding, along with an unsupervised 'green water' — water from the local untreated water

supply — public swimming pool. In retrospect, this was a kind of DIY system of national fitness, with the ‘green water’ unsupervised public swimming pool probably contributing to more unhealthy lives than the play centres provided for any level of personal fitness amongst the town’s young people.

The AEC 1936

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) met in December 2013 and agreed to new Council arrangements, including the establishment of an education council. The Education Council would be one of eight under the new COAG Council system. For decades it operated in another form under the nomenclature of the Australian Council of Education, having its origins in the pre-war Coalition Government.

For decades the Commonwealth, states and territories established had maintained a dialogue *vis-à-vis* education and schooling through the AEC until it folded prior to the establishment of COAG. The Lyons Coalition Government established the AEC in 1936 (Spaull, 1987). The establishment of the AEC was innocent enough, evolving from a meeting called in March 1936 by David Drummond, NSW Minister of Education. The purpose of the meeting was to enlist Commonwealth financial support for technical education. Harold Wyndham, Cunningham’s collaborator from the NSW Department of Education installed as the inaugural secretary of the Council. It comprised all state ministers of education with a standing committee of their directors of education. The AEC sent a deputation to the Prime Minister, Joseph Lyons, urgently seeking grants-in-aid to the states to step up technical training in view of the likelihood of war but was ‘turned down flat’ (J.P. Hughes, 2002, p. 5). Little else emerged from the committee until the Commonwealth was faced with the imperatives of post-war reconstruction. For the intervening years, ‘one observer claimed the meetings had been little more than a “holiday” in which very little forward planning was done’ (J.P. Hughes, 2002, p. 5).

Analysis and conclusions

At a national level, the initiatives undertaken during the inter-war period of cooperative federalism have produced some amazing long-lasting and profound results. Of course, there were political imperatives during these decades, but unlike other periods of Commonwealth leverage on states and territories in their schooling and education, these were not the kind of activities which polarised public opinion.

How do we interpret these Commonwealth initiatives in early childhood, primary and secondary school education? Was it progress, or simply interference by the state in the lives of working-class families? While Whig historians may argue for it all being progress, they must do so by well-qualified examples. Certainly, these Commonwealth initiatives constituted progress, but they also constituted political interference in the daily lives of working-class families. Perhaps, to argue these changes fitted neo-Marxist paradigm would be a little extreme, but nevertheless, the state was putting school educational measures in place shaping the national efficiency of the working class. However, working-class children would benefit in ways other than that which solely suited the state. These students became the parents of children, who as young adults like myself attended teachers' colleges in the 1950s and 1960s.

There was political opportunity for all these actions by the Commonwealth into school education. It was not simply a matter of a compassionate government establishing ministerial councils within the framework of cooperative federalism, and then benevolently making budgetary provisions to provide for initiatives in certain provisions in school education. In every instance in the Commonwealth's establishment of the NHMRC, the ACER, the AEC and the NFC, the *zeitgeist* of Bolshevik fear, national efficiency and finally Australia's isolationist position from encroaching panic of a Japanese invasion, underpinned by the dominant progressive *zeitgeist*, conservative governments sought to intervene in the limited manner afforded by cooperative federalism.

Despite what has been written concerning Commonwealth encroachment into schooling, to the trained eye and mind of an erudite contemporary observer such as Cunningham could write ‘with minor exceptions the federal Government does not enter the field of education’ (Cunningham & Pratt, 1940, p. 73, cited in Harmen & Smart, 1982, p. 1).

In the face of possible Japanese invasion, the perceived problem was a deteriorating level of national fitness. The degree in which the Commonwealth could respond, given the tight limitations imposed by federalism, was through legislation enabling ministerial councils. Given the dominant notions of cooperative federalism, the political will came with the establishment of ministerial councils, *inter alia* allowing for Commonwealth leverage on aspects of schooling, resulting in the policies associated with the various ministerial councils discussed above.

Determined by the imperatives of cooperative federalism and the quest for national efficiency in the face of an approaching war, at arms length through its ministerial councils the Commonwealth assisted in the development of school physical education, race motherhood through Lady Gowrie infant schools. Referred to as progress, these were add-ons to existing state provisions, most likely perceived in positive terms in providing what cash-strapped state budgets could not provide. For most, they certainly were not perceived of as the Commonwealth intruding into a state jurisdiction. Overwhelmingly, a compliant media portrayed these Commonwealth engagements with school education were portrayed as progress. The Burnie *Advocate*’s (1939) account cited above was typical.

We need to remind ourselves of the three strands of federalism — legal, financial and political. In respect to the legal strand, Commonwealth ministerial councils could hardly warrant a High Court challenge, given the low-level of political opposition to these initiatives. Given the dire financial situation of the Commonwealth

and the states caused by the Great Depression any small Commonwealth handout to assist school education was welcomed by the states. These initiatives through the Commonwealth ministerial councils were, indeed, quite inert affairs, and the product of a Commonwealth with strong political imperatives.

Given the *zeitgeist* of eugenic inspired national fitness emanating from a general drive towards progressivism and national efficiency, as defined by Roe (1984, pp. 9-12), and given the conservative governments of the period, ministerial councils seem now to be a logical outcome. National progress was defined in terms of national efficiency, and that required governments — state and federal — working cooperative to enhance the fitness of the population.

Given these limitations, the Commonwealth was able to engage with school education through ministerial councils, jointly attended by relevant Commonwealth and state ministers. When granted additional financial leverage through the acquisition of income tax, the Commonwealth would be able to leverage states and territories much more in future decades in respect to school education.

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