

The Struggle for Curriculum Reform in Australia 1987-1993



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Alan Barcan
University of Newcastle

Strenuous efforts to reform the school curriculum began in 1987. The Commonwealth government sought to introduce a National Curriculum with a vocational bias, while in New South Wales reform put stronger emphasis on liberal studies. Other states tackled curriculum reform at different times and to different degrees. Reform embraced not only the range of subjects ('learning areas') but their content and interpretation, standards, and teaching methods. A struggle for control ensued between the Commonwealth and the states and between ministries and departments of education. Other contestants included teachers' unions, subject associations, classroom teachers, academic teacher educators, vocational interests and various pressure groups. Although the draft National Curriculum was rebuffed in 1993, many of its features were adopted by various education systems. New curriculum policies were bolstered by changes in forms of assessment.

In 1987-88 the Commonwealth and New South Wales governments launched efforts to reform the school curriculum. After 1993 these initiatives continued, though at a more moderate pace. These efforts were strongly motivated by anxiety over Australia's economic competitiveness. The alarm of employers over the inadequate vocational preparation of young Australians was augmented by the concern of parents and, to some extent academics, over the nature and quality of Australian education. The reformers encountered resistance from teachers' unions, academic educationists, some of the educational bureaucracy, and some parents. Many teachers, educated in the 1970s and 1980s, lacked the secure knowledge needed to teach a content-focused curriculum.

The reform of the curriculum was part of a wider reconstruction of public schooling which paralleled similar initiatives in other English-speaking democracies such as England, New Zealand and America. Alongside a thrust towards devolution of authority, school self-

management, and downsizing, efforts were made to strengthen central control of the curriculum. In Australia reform usually involved reduction of the already-ineffective authority of Departments of Education and the growth of the politically-controlled Ministries of Education. Formal responsibility for curriculum shifted from the Departments of Education to new Boards of Studies. In government primary schools Departmental control of the curriculum had withered over the previous two decades as school-based curricula became widespread. In the secondary years university influence on the academic curriculum had declined.

Three contemporary commentators, an academic, an administrator and a school principal, provide contrasting views of the historical context of reform. The late Professor W. F. Connell, a lifelong champion of progressive education but well-removed from the classroom, hailed the 'curriculum revolution' as the biggest change in Australian education in the quarter century from 1960 to 1985. It multiplied the areas of study and placed more responsibility for curriculum development in the hands of teachers. Connell welcomed this as a shift from instruction to education, extending education 'beyond the mere acquisition of knowledge or skill.'¹

Somewhat closer to school realities, Garth Boomer, an educational administrator in both the South Australian and Commonwealth systems, was more sombre. The period since 1960 was one of 'systemic schizophrenia' in which official curriculum statements and actual curriculum practice in schools have become progressively more incongruent'. The sixties brought a breakout, the seventies an expansion of choice, but the eighties sought more emphasis on performance and accountability. The 1990s promised to be a decade of national reconstruction and curriculum frameworks, as the systems reclaimed the curriculum control which they had lost to the schools in the seventies and early eighties. Both the 'hard Right' and the 'hard Left' saw this as in the national interest, for different reasons.²

Dr Ian Paterson, principal of Knox Grammar School, Sydney, and a member of the Carrick Committee then helping to reorganize NSW education, took a starker view. The teachers of the 1970s had their chance. It was their 'golden age'. Teacher numbers doubled, salaries jumped, massive funds flowed into schools, school-based curriculum became the vogue, the authority of principals was sapped. 'By the end of the 1970s, it was apparent that children were not performing well.' Business and industry complained, the public began to ask questions. The result was a plethora of reports and investigations across Australia.³

For more than a decade Departments of Education had tried to tackle the crisis in education. Now the politicians stepped in. In July 1987, John Dawkins, an economics graduate with previous ministerial experience

in Trade and Youth Affairs, became Commonwealth Minister for Employment, Education and Training in the Hawke Labor government. In addition to energetically restructuring higher education, he also championed the idea of a national curriculum with a strong vocational emphasis focusing particularly on scientific-technological studies.

Dawkins Seeks a National Curriculum

Australia's economic circumstances were causing alarm. In late 1987 Dawkins, and A. C. Holding, Minister for Employment Services and Youth Affairs, issued a booklet, *Skills for Australia*, whose opening sentence sounded the alarm. 'Skills and skill formation policies are of central importance to the task of structural adjustment facing Australia'. Education and training systems must play an active role in this process. The retention rate to Year 12, 48.7 per cent in 1986, had to reach 65 per cent by the early 1990s. To achieve this it would be necessary to make the final years of secondary education more attractive. At the same time the 'quality, structure and flexibility' of education and training also had to be improved. 'More needs to be known about levels of competence achieved by our students at school, especially in the core disciplines of language, mathematics and science'.⁴ John Dawkins elaborated the message in his May 1988 statement, 'Strengthening Australia's Schools', which called for a 'common curriculum framework' and greater emphasis on higher levels of literacy, numeracy and analytical skills. The Minister added that this common framework should be complemented by 'a common national approach to assessment'.⁵

The retention rate in state schools did increase, but not simply by making the senior secondary years 'more attractive.' The Commonwealth Government abolished the dole for adolescents aged 16 to 18 years as from 1 January 1988. It was replaced by Austudy assistance for those staying at school and a Jobsearch allowance for those not doing so, the maximum rate being the same for both. The dole was no longer more attractive financially than being a student. But the new cohort of reluctant students in Years 11 and 12 required adaptation of the curriculum; raising the proportion staying to Year 12 and raising standards of achievement concealed contradictory policies.

To implement curriculum reform Dawkins relied on the Australian Education Council (the nine Commonwealth, State and Territory ministers for education). In June 1988 the AEC appointed a consultancy team to survey similarities and differences in curricula as a basis for discussion about national curriculum frameworks. The team's report, *Mapping the Australian Curriculum*, was compiled at great speed, being submitted to the various Ministers of Education at the end of 1988. Volume 1,

The General Curriculum, surveyed the situation in government systems at both primary and secondary level; the second volume, *The Mathematics Curriculum*, examined this vocational subject in detail.

Mapping the Curriculum was a survey of policy documents, to which school reality might or might not approximate. It reported that in primary schools Departments of Education provided guidelines, policy statements, curriculum frameworks or (in Queensland and Western Australia) syllabuses, but the schools were free to interpret these as they wished. The curriculum was organised into some seven broad 'learning areas'—English, mathematics, social education, the Arts (music, art, craft, drama), science, and health (physical education, personal development).⁶

In the junior secondary years the most common 'learning areas' were English, Mathematics, Science, Social studies/social science (history, geography, social studies, commerce, Asian social studies, human society, social and cultural education), Health/Physical education, Craft (craft, technics, technical studies, technology, metalwork, woodwork, home arts), and Arts (visual arts, fine and performing arts, expressive arts, music). New South Wales had reintroduced some syllabuses, Queensland schools offered subjects, South Australia provided a curriculum framework, but in all States and Territories the schools could interpret these documents as they wished. In Victoria, South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory, teachers were given no indication of the levels of achievement to expect from pupils. Western Australia provided guidance regarding objectives and standards. Queensland used criterion-based assessment (identifying specific items to be mastered). Tasmania was moving towards criterion-based assessment. In New South Wales and the Northern Territory specification of student achievement varied between different subjects.⁷

In the senior secondary school (Years 11 and 12) content-based subjects survived, largely because some form of external examination existed (except in Queensland and the ACT). No subjects were mandatory, except English in New South Wales and Western Australia; in practice, the vast majority of students took English and mathematics and a large number took science. Only in four systems did a foreign language rank in the twenty most popular subjects. The senior secondary curriculum was expanding, because of provision for school-based and school-assessed courses alongside publicly-examined subjects.⁸

In April 1989, the Australian Education Council adopted the 'Hobart Declaration on Schooling', which named ten 'national goals for schooling in Australia'. These focused heavily on the provision of high standards of knowledge and skills. The Council set up a Curriculum Corporation.

Its owners were the Commonwealth, State, and Territory ministers for education, except for New South Wales. The Council's Board of Directors included representatives of the National Catholic Education Commission and the National Council of Independent Schools. The Curriculum Corporation re-established the flow of publications which had been a function of the defunct Curriculum Development Centre.⁹

At its April 1991 meeting, the AEC approved eight areas of learning as suitable for a National Curriculum—English, Mathematics, Science, Languages other than English, Technology, Studies of Society and Environment, The Arts, and Health. It also appointed a Curriculum and Assessment Committee to organise the production of national statements and profiles for each of these areas by June 1993. The National Statements were to outline the main knowledge and skills distinctive to a given curriculum area. They would identify the essential elements (strands) and show how they might be organised across the four bands of schooling—early primary, primary, junior secondary, upper secondary. The Profiles were to describe learning outcomes for each of the curriculum areas. They were to be arranged in eight levels, showing in progressive order of difficulty the skills and knowledge in which students needed to be proficient. In other words, the National Curriculum would be outcomes-based. The profiles provided an alternative to assessment by Australia-wide tests or examinations, which would have been highly unpopular with many teachers and educational theorists.¹⁰

The construction of a National Curriculum became contentious. One element contributing to this was the recent adoption of social justice policies by the Labor Party. In 1988 the federal ALP issued *Towards a Fairer Australia: Social Justice Under Labor* providing a social justice framework for all areas of government, with particular emphasis on multiculturalism. Labor governments in Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia and, belatedly, Queensland developed social justice in education strategies between 1988 and 1992. Social justice in education could be interpreted in several ways. The moderates emphasised increased access, preparation for vocations and trades, increased retention rates, access to higher education, and the needs of special groups. The radicals wanted a curriculum catering for the 'interests' or 'perspectives' of disadvantaged groups such as the poor, women, Aborigines, ethnic groups and even homosexuals. They also often opposed grading in classes or examinations. The broader view was expounded in the 1993 book *Schooling—Reform in Hard Times*, edited by Bob Lingard, John Knight and Paige Porter, prominent figures in the Australian Curriculum Studies Association. The main radical exponent of social justice in education was the sociologist R.W. Connell, son of Professor W. F. Connell. Bob Connell's

papers at many conferences in the late 1980s provided the groundwork for his 1993 book *Schools and Social Justice*.¹¹

Commonwealth Initiatives in Post-Compulsory Schooling and Training

In 1990 the Australian Education Council established a working party on post-compulsory schooling and training, a category covering 15 to 19 year-olds in Years 11 and 12 and Technical and Further Education [TAFE], as well as in a small group of private providers. Three enquiries heralded new policies: the Finn and Mayer Reports focused on the upper secondary school and TAFE, while the Carmichael Report investigated the association between training and entry into the workforce.

Early in 1991 the AEC appointed Brian Finn of the International Business Machines company to chair an 8-member committee of business people which six months later produced a report, *Young People's Participation in Post-Compulsory Education and Training*.¹² The Finn Report argued that general and vocational education were converging. It suggested that by the year 2001, 95 per cent of 19 year-olds should have completed Year 12 or some other form of education and training. It identified six key areas of competence—Language and Communication, Mathematics, Scientific and Technological Understanding, Cultural Understanding, Problem Solving, and Personal and Interpersonal Skills. These key competencies were to be defined in common terms across the senior secondary school and TAFE. It also recommended credit transfer and articulation between school, TAFE, industry, private providers and universities.

The Mayer Committee, established by the AEC and MOVEET (the Ministers of Vocational Education, Employment and Training), refined the Finn concept of key competencies to facilitate their use in curriculum development and nationally-consistent assessment and reporting. The Committee's report, *Putting General Education to Work*, was presented in September 1992. While the chairman, Eric Mayer, former Chief Executive Officer of National Mutual, had a business background, his committee was much larger than the Finn Committee and included more educationists. The Mayer Committee worked more slowly and was more consultative. It identified seven employment-related key competencies—collecting, analysing and organising information, communicating ideas and information, planning and organising activities, working with others and in teams, using mathematical ideas and techniques, solving problems, and using technology. These competencies were seen as *generic*, i.e. were relevant across different subject areas. They were additional to various subject-specific outcomes, which could be applied to the whole curriculum.

The Carmichael Report, *The Australian Vocational Certificate and Training System*, was released in March 1992. The review was chaired by Laurie Carmichael, formerly of the Australian Council of Trade Unions. 'The principal thrust of the Carmichael Report, which built on the Finn recommendations, was a new work-force entry training system. Again, competencies were established as the link between the traditionally separate processes of general education and vocational training. As Carmichael had been a member of the Finn Committee, this continuity was not unexpected.¹³

The competencies framework sparked off a vigorous debate, the advocates being mainly the ministerial groups which commissioned the reports, and business, industry and trade union groups; opposition came mainly from teachers and academic educationists.

Some states and territories awaited the completion of the National Curriculum Statements and Profiles before initiating reform. However, New South Wales, Victoria, Western Australia and South Australia launched new, though varying, initiatives.

The Radical Right and Reform in NSW

When in March 1988 the Liberals, in coalition with the National Party, won office in New South Wales, Dr Terry Metherell became Minister for Education. He immediately launched reforms intended to restore 'excellence' to public education. Changes directly related to the curriculum included printing additional information on the Higher School Certificate, reintroducing the recently discarded School Certificate at the end of Year 10, extending the moderation procedures in the School Certificate examination beyond English and mathematics to include science, and introducing basic skills tests in English and mathematics in Years 3 and 6. In September 1988 Metherell appointed a Committee of Review of New South Wales Schools with Sir John Carrick as chairman, whose surveillance included the curriculum.

The following month the Minister issued a *Discussion Paper on the Curriculum in New South Wales*. Parents, taxpayers and governments, he wrote, are entitled to know what is being taught in government and non-government schools; why it is being taught; how well it is being taught; and whether schools are the most effective places to teach it. The document stated that while 'schooling must provide our young people with knowledge, skills and attitudes that are relevant to the broad economic priorities of the nation' this had to be balanced by 'a commitment to a broader general education for personal growth and community responsibility'.¹⁴ It proposed eight 'Key Learning Areas' for the secondary curriculum and suggested that vocational subjects

be strengthened. Concern was also expressed at the proliferation of 'Other Approved Studies' in Years 11 and 12. These were not publicly examined and were not included in the Higher School Certificate aggregate, which governed access to universities. In 1987, 2358 OAS were being taught in government and non-government schools. In addition, some 2056 school courses were also approved for the School Certificate, taken at the completion of Year 10.

The September 1989 report of the Carrick Committee of Review of New South Wales Schools argued in its chapter on the curriculum that 'a reconciliation between the liberal and instrumental traditions is both possible and desirable'. Unlike the *Discussion Paper*, it discussed integration between subjects (favoured by progressives), stating that 'some opportunities should be provided for integration' but warning that this might lead to 'vagueness, lack of purpose and loss of disciplined knowledge'. The Report recommended the establishment of a new Board of Studies, independent of the Department of Education, which would control both the primary and secondary curriculum and issue 'comprehensive and detailed syllabuses' to guide teachers.¹⁵ Thus, the primary school curriculum, for nearly two decades exempt from close scrutiny, would again be regulated.

The November 1989 White Paper, *Excellence and Equity: New South Wales Curriculum Reform*, drew on the 1988 *Discussion Paper* and the Carrick Report. It organised the primary curriculum into six Key Learning Areas—English, Mathematics, Science and technology, Human Society and its environment, Creative and practical arts, and Personal development, health and physical education. The secondary curriculum was organised into eight similar Key Learning Areas—English, Mathematics, Science, Human society and its environment, Modern and classical languages, Technological and applied studies, Creative arts, and Personal development, health and physical education. For the School Certificate, students were to choose studies from eight key learning areas and for the Higher School Certificate from four. *In Years 7–10* English, Mathematics and Science each comprised a single course, but Human Society and its environment provided an umbrella for six courses, including history and geography, while Modern and classical Languages accommodated seventeen subjects ranging from Arabic to Vietnamese. Technological and applied studies accommodated eight subjects. Australian history and geography were to be compulsory for at least two years. Courses devised in the school and approved by the Board were to be reduced significantly. *In Years 11–12* the range of subjects within each key learning area was greater: Languages accommodated twenty-eight, Technological studies eleven, and Human society studies ten.¹⁶

The Education Reform Act of June 1990 implemented the new system. Unlike previous education acts, it specified in broad terms the curriculum for state primary and secondary schools. It established a Board of Studies, to be responsible for curriculum development in primary and secondary schools, and for examinations and assessment for the School Certificate and Higher School Certificate. The Act required that any syllabus endorsed by the Board was to indicate 'the aims, objectives and desired outcomes in terms of knowledge and skills'. The Board was also responsible for the registration and accreditation of non-government schools. Registration gave the right to function as a school; accreditation gave the right to present students for the two examination certificates, and hence largely determined a school's curriculum.

Under Metherell and his successor, Mrs Virginia Chadwick, some secondary schools were given a curriculum bias. By the end of 1991 New South Wales had twenty-one academic selective high schools, twenty-seven technology high schools, seventeen language high schools, a school specialising in sport, and another in performing arts. A senior high school and the conservatorium high school completed the range of specialist schools.

The May 1991 NSW elections returned a minority Liberal-National Coalition government, dependent on the support of independents. The opposition of teachers to educational reform had almost cost the Coalition the election. Henceforth Mrs Chadwick was disposed to placate the Teachers' Federation and the Parents' and Citizens' Association.¹⁷

A protracted struggle had developed between the Board of Studies, some of its syllabus committees, the Ministry, and the Department, which had revived its interest in curriculum control. One consequence was an inordinate delay in producing a new infants-primary school English syllabus. In 1992, the draft syllabus, replete with fashionable educational jargon, aroused widespread objections and was referred back to the Board of Studies for further consideration. In 1989 work had started on a *Human Society and its Environment* syllabus to replace the 1982 'Curriculum Policy Statement', *Investigating Social Studies (K-6)*. The syllabus did not appear until 1998 because of the Board's absorption in the struggle over the English syllabus, the variety of interests contesting the syllabus, and the strong resistance of those wanting to emphasise social science skills rather than historical and geographical content. The use of the word 'invasion' in the 1994 draft *Human Society and its Environment K-6 Syllabus* to describe the arrival of British settlers generated particular criticism. The NSW Teachers' Federation decided to ban any section of a syllabus from which the word 'invasion' had been removed.¹⁸

The impasse was resolved by requiring that in Stage 2 (Years 3 and 4) the 'Significant Events and People' strand should explain 'why terms such as 'invasion', 'occupation', 'settlement', 'exploration' and 'discovery' reflect different perspectives on the same event.' The syllabus remained 'inclusive', i. e. multicultural, incorporating 'gender, Aboriginal, citizenship, multicultural, environmental, work and global perspectives' and was to include studies of Asia where appropriate.¹⁹ Strangely, *Human Society and its Environment* also accommodated the study of languages other than English.

A comparable controversy concerned the draft geography syllabus for junior secondary years. In July 1992 the principals of two private schools, Presbyterian and Anglican, protested that the syllabus committee's demand for an 'inclusive perspective' threatened 'our Judaeo-Christian mind-set and way of looking at the world'.²⁰ The new School Certificate syllabus in English incorporated some 140 specific outcomes designed, wrote an indignant teacher in 1992, to 'obfuscate and relegate to obscurantism the purpose of teaching English'.²¹ Friction continued and in March 1994, the Minister, Mrs Chadwick, dismissed the chairman of the Board of Studies. Nevertheless, the *Sydney Morning Herald* claimed in a four-part front page series on education in August 1994 that NSW curriculum reform had 'set the standard for the rest of Australia'.²²

Addressing NSW administrators in August 1991 Garth Boomer, former progressive and now Associate Director-General of Education (Curriculum) in South Australia, suggested that terms like 'empowerment' and 'social justice' were debased coinage; he recommended a moratorium on their use. Too often, conferences looked at lists of disadvantaged groups and then considered the *causes* of injustice and the importance of 'inclusive' and 'fair' teaching behaviours. But the primary focus should be on 'getting the *disadvantaged* up to the *educational* mark where they can hold their own in life's stakes'.²³

Five weaknesses troubled syllabus reform: the failure to confront the problem of integrating subjects, the attempt to suggest a false coherence by grouping subjects under an umbrella title, the inclination of radicals to advance identity politics under the rubric of social justice, the use of vague and pretentious educational jargon, and the evasion of assessment problems by adopting an outcomes approach, which led to a proliferation of confusing and sometimes conflicting aims.

Vocational education started on a new path when Bradfield College opened at Crows Nest, Sydney, in 1993, catering for Years 11–12. This co-educational senior college was a combined project of the Department of School Education and TAFE, with a first intake of 180 students coming from all over Sydney. It offered a Higher School Certificate, a Tertiary

Education Rank, and TAFE accreditation. The arrival of Year 12 students brought total enrolments to 270. A second college, the North Coast Coff's Harbour Education Campus opened two years later. The small classes (averaging about 15 students), the older age of the students, and the strong vocational emphasis, promised to reduce discipline problems, make the colleges attractive to teachers, and enhance student achievement.²⁴

The Radical Left and Curriculum Confusion in Victoria

In Victoria, where Labor was in power, curriculum reform did not start properly until 1993, mainly because of the resistance of progressives and radicals, deeply-entrenched in the main teachers' unions. Nevertheless, the need for reform was widely recognised. In August 1987, Premier John Cain asserted that the demand for greater emphasis on numeracy and literacy was 'neither narrow nor uninformed' and that the State Board of Education's recent publication, *Directions in Curriculum*, gave no guidance to schools.²⁵ In the same month the Minister for Education, Ian Cathie, announced that a sample of ten and fourteen year-olds would be tested in 1988 in reading, writing and numeracy. The unions subsequently succeeded in getting rid of Cathie and a range of union leaders and educationists denounced testing but the proposed tests still eventuated, if only to pre-empt the more extensive testing promised by the leader of the Liberal Opposition, Jeff Kennett. Giving the annual State Board of Education lecture in May 1988, Garth Boomer, former chairman of the Australian Schools Commission, urged teachers to accept the necessity of state-wide and nation-wide literacy testing.²⁶

In June 1988, Doug White of La Trobe University remarked in a paper published by the State Board of Education that after two decades of curriculum change Victoria had still not got it right. 'We know also that another upheaval, another set of directives or a grand new curriculum project will not solve the curriculum problem.'²⁷ Bruce Wilson, policy analyst with the State Board and manager of the Years 7-10 project, commented in October 1988 that school-based curriculum development meant 'it is now virtually impossible to answer with any certainty questions about the collective school experience of young Victorians'. Moreover, 'there is no statement at present which offers substantial guidance to schools in determining what students should learn'.²⁸

The State Board of Education, chaired by Bill Hannan, attempted to extend its control over the curriculum by producing a *Curriculum and Standards Framework* in 1988, which anticipated material soon to appear in the statements and profiles of the proposed National Curriculum. It also incorporated outcomes, a new concept intended to shift the emphasis somewhat from process towards content.

The Victorian Ministry of Education, enmeshed in its convoluted curriculum policy, was unreceptive to the Dawkins proposals. Responding in August 1988 to *Strengthening Australia's Schools*, a bureaucrat enjoying the magnificent title of Acting Chief Executive and Chief General Manager of Schools Division, stated that Victoria's position was 'essentially congruent' with that of the Commonwealth, but a national curriculum had to be general enough to respect the autonomy of school systems and individual schools. Victoria would support assessment techniques which showed standards achieved by students, but opposed comparison with average performances. Also, Victoria would not accept national assessment at Years 3, 6 and 9.²⁹ In April 1989, Mrs Joan Kirner, Minister for Education and a leading member of the Socialist Left faction of the Victorian Labor Party, told the Hobart meeting of the Australian Education Council: 'I haven't come here to support a national curriculum unless I am absolutely convinced that it is in the best interests of the kids. I am not yet convinced'.³⁰

She had outlined her curriculum ideology at a primary principals conference in November 1988:

My vision of the future means scrapping any unhelpful differentiations which still exist between academic and non-academic students and learning It means emphasizing the importance of ... studies not previously considered central to the curriculum in Victoria—the study of labour ... the study of the role of women, Multicultural and Community Language Studies, Aboriginal Studies, Technology Studies, Environmental Education and Health Education. These studies are not to be seen as optional frills but part of the centrality of learning ...³¹

This harmonised with a concept of 'social justice' as the advancement of the interests of allegedly disadvantaged special interest groups. But the connection between schooling and social justice was elusive. Premier John Cain was content to view 'a sound, comprehensive education' as the basic principle of social justice.³²

Unreconstructed radicalism remained strong in the junior secondary school. In March 1991, an Education Correspondent in *The Age* newspaper summed up a chapter in *New Wave Geography*, a series developed by the Geography Teachers' Association of Victoria. The message for Year 9 students was:

uranium bad, the rich bad, the poor good, forests good, loggers bad, toxic waste bad, multinational corporations bad, men bad, Third World men (with Australian men not far behind) real bad, tourists bad, Australian tourists in Bali appalling, the human race disgusting.³³

A prolonged and agonising debate raged over the plan to replace the Higher School Certificate at the end of Year 12 by a Victorian Certificate of Education. The 1985 Blackburn Report, *Ministerial Review of Postcompulsory Schooling*, had stated that whereas the Higher School Certificate compared the achievement of students to determine their fitness for higher education, the VCE would record achievements over a wide range of subjects, many of which, e.g. dance and drama, could not be assessed in the traditional way. Organisation of the curriculum into semester units would afford greater choice—over the two years students would take 24 units rather than 11 subjects.³⁴ Common Assessment Tasks were introduced in all Year 12 courses; they were to be 'reported' on (rather than graded) by teachers on an A to E scale. The universities objected to the lowering of standards, while the Victorian Secondary Teachers' Association opposed the elitism of academic studies. Parents' associations supported the unions.

Even when the VCE eventuated in 1991 changes continued to be made. Australian Studies, initially compulsory, became optional. However, the VCE widened the domain of externally-prescribed studies. Previously only Year 12 students had followed externally-defined courses. Now Year 11 students also followed the VCE programmes.³⁵

The electoral victory in October 1992 of the Liberal-National Party Coalition led by Jeff Kennett installed a new Minister for Education, Don Hayward, and a new Director of School Education, Geoff Spring. They sought to change the administration of schooling. A policy statement, *Schools of the Future* (January 1993) promised a Board of Studies to establish a curriculum framework for both primary and secondary schools; more influence for parents and the community; more power for school principals; and a restructuring of school councils so that teachers would not dominate them. The government imported Professor Sam Ball from New South Wales as Chief Executive Officer of the new Board of Studies.³⁶ Massive cuts in expenditure were also implemented. In the first three years of the Liberal regime more than 8000 teachers (some 20 per cent of the service) lost their jobs as well as 1300 education bureaucrats, and almost 300 schools were closed. The 'self-managing schools' were nominally in charge of 92 per cent of their budget, the highest proportion in the country, although most of this was determined for them by teachers' salaries.³⁷ Principals were to control global budgets and staff appointments. Accountability was strengthened by requiring each school to prepare a School Charter. While the Curriculum and Standards Framework supposedly regulated the curriculum, schools were given considerable flexibility. A pilot scheme allowed 322 schools to specialise in areas of the curriculum.

The Minister for Education confronted a senior secondary school curriculum marked by a 'peculiar blend of 'learner-centred' pedagogy and rigid formalism embodied in the VCE', and a related elevation of process over content. Teaching was constrained by the structural elements of the VCE, particularly the internally-assessed Common Assessment Task (with its emphasis on independent 'research'), the distinction between CATs and non-assessed (and therefore devalued) Work Requirements, and criteria-based assessment (which created general confusion and anxiety).³⁸ The new Board of Studies increased the weight of external assessment in the VCE, making an even 50/50 balance but otherwise left the VCE intact.

Western Australia: Progressive education collides with restructuring

While in the 1980s some states reacted against progressive education, Western Australia adopted many of its elements. The rising retention rate, with an associated increase in the proportion of low-ability students in secondary schools, drew attention to the need to modify the curriculum. A new Labor government elected in 1983 launched new initiatives. It appointed a Committee of Inquiry into Education in Western Australia, chaired by Kim Beazley, a former Minister for Education in the Whitlam-led federal Labor government.

The 1984 Beazley Report, *Education in Western Australia*, wanted to 'deflect the emphasis from subject requirements towards student needs' and 'precipitate a breakdown in sex stereotyping and of traditional patterns of subject choice'. It advocated equal status for all subjects in the curriculum and argued that 'the whole nature of curriculum organisation at the school level should be changed so as to make integration feasible where necessary'.³⁹ The introduction in 1988 of the Unit Curriculum meant splitting all subjects into 12-week courses or modules. These discrete units had different levels of difficulty, to provide all students with work appropriate to their ability. Curriculum development was to proceed at the school level. Students were to choose their own courses, with advice from teachers. The educational administrators believed they were eliminating 'the adverse social effects of academic streaming, while still catering for the multiplicity of student interests, talents and abilities'.⁴⁰ But they ignored the Beazley Report's warning that the Education Department would need to appoint a team of consultants to conduct workshops, initiate innovative projects in community participation, produce a range of materials, and conduct in-service courses in each school.

In 1984, also, a sub-committee of the Beazley inquiry, chaired by Professor Barry McGaw, looked at assessment in the upper secondary school. It recommended that upper secondary two-year courses be divided into single-year units and an expansion in the range of school-assessed

subjects, while the number available for admission to tertiary institutions would be cut.⁴¹

Unfortunately, the introduction of the unit curriculum coincided with structural reforms of the state apparatus as Western Australia began to implement neo-classical economic principles, popularly termed 'economic rationalism'. The associated cost-cutting and downsizing in public sector management produced traumatic changes in the Department of Education and helped bring disaster to the new curriculum.

Better Schools in Western Australia: A Programme for Improvement, issued in January 1987, led to the restructuring of the Department of Education into the Ministry of Education and introduced administrative devolution. School-based Decision Making Groups were established. The restructuring led to the demise of curriculum writers and subject consultants. Teachers were overloaded; in many schools the quality of the curriculum deteriorated; timetabling difficulties appeared; advisory services to students and parents were inadequate; competition developed between subjects; lower ability students continued to be poorly motivated; and resources were lacking. In 1989 both the Minister for Education who introduced the unit curriculum, Bob Pearce, and his successor, Carmen Lawrence, admitted the debacle. Pearce conceded that allowing the schools to develop their own curricula was probably a mistake. 'There was a huge amount of reinventing the wheel from school to school.' When Carmen Lawrence became Minister she recognised 'something close to chaos reigning in the system.'⁴²

In 1988 the Ministry of Education responded to increasing interest in a new curriculum area, called technology, by funding two metropolitan and four country high schools to introduce it into their curricula. This move modified the state's long-time commitment to comprehensive high schools.⁴³

Teacher influence over the curriculum expanded in June 1990, when a Memorandum of Agreement between the Ministry and the Teachers' Union abolished the routine submission of teacher programmes to principals.⁴⁴ A writer in the 'radical dossier', *Education Links*, suggested that most teachers embraced the concept of the unit curriculum as progressive because it provided an opportunity to design 'learning programs more relevant to students' specific needs'. It also provided some radical teachers with 'an opportunity to subvert the hold of the traditional subject-centred curriculum and its didactic modes of pedagogy'.⁴⁵

South Australia: New forms of assessment to control the curriculum

The considerable control of South Australian state schools over the curriculum was curbed in August 1990 when Dr Ken Boston, Director-

General of the South Australian Education Department, distributed a memorandum, 'Levels of Attainment: The process' in which he announced that South Australia would move towards an outcomes-based approach to curriculum. Curriculum Unit Teams would present student outcomes statements at six attainment levels in Key Learning Areas. Garth Boomer, a lapsed neo-progressive, who was Associate Director-General of Education (Curriculum) from 1988 to 1993, enthusiastically endorsed Attainment levels. They would be applied across Years 1-10 for eight areas of study. Curriculum support, he said in November 1990, had been 'strong on injunction and exhortation, on setting out processes, skills and values to be pursued' but was 'relatively weak or silent on specific student outcomes which might be expected and assessed at various stages'. There was no agreement on how to recognise whether the intentions had been achieved nor, in the compulsory years of schooling, a common method of reporting what had been achieved. Boomer aroused some hostility in 1991 when the *Adelaide Advertiser* reported on its front page that he had told a group of teachers that South Australian primary schools were teaching children 'low level crap'. But, of course, the effectiveness of the new approach depended on the levels which the Curriculum Unit Teams set as acceptable outcomes.⁴⁶

In the senior secondary years the South Australian Certificate of Education, introduced in 1992 and first awarded at the end of 1993, widened the curriculum to accommodate the broader ability-range of students now enrolled. Every subject in the SACE had tasks which required student 'research'. The Senior Secondary Assessment Board developed an 'Extended Subject Framework', within which each school or teacher could develop a programme, though it required all plans for student assessment to be submitted for its approval.

A compulsory semester of Australian Studies was included in the Certificate of Education. This meant that for the first time all students would study social science in the senior school. The 'Overview' for Australian Studies identified some of the 'issues' (unresolved conflicts or crises) to be studied. It insisted on a critical analysis of social issues and on students considering different points of view. They were to realise that decisions about right and wrong were essentially value-based, contestable, and changeable. They were to ask not only 'What happens?' but also 'Why?', 'What else might be?', 'For what purpose?' and 'In whose interest?' This relativist, socially-critical approach opened the door for generalisations and speculations which were probably beyond the comprehension of many students and some teachers. Students were to apply their knowledge of these issues and to initiate follow-up activities, which 'could range along a continuum from raising the

awareness of their peers, to influencing the decision-making processes of social groups and systems.' Was this a training for political activists—or training in good citizenship?

'Inclusivity' was to govern content selection. 'Teachers are required to include the lives and experiences of women, the aged, people in poverty, Aboriginal peoples, people from non English speaking backgrounds and people with disabilities'. But in assessment only Aboriginal perspectives were mandatory, to the concern of some feminists.⁴⁷

Meanwhile, the Commonwealth government was widening its focus on curriculum objectives.

Commonwealth Promotion of Non-English Languages

In 1987 Dawkins and Holding referred to the importance of doing more about the 'core disciplines, languages, mathematics and science'. Federal politicians had frequently expressed concern about science and mathematics, but languages was a new interest. The Commonwealth's anxiety to promote the teaching of non-English languages, particularly Asian, had vocational, commercial and political motives. Proponents of both 'community' (ethnic) languages and modern cultural languages (French and German) regarded this new initiative with concern.

The Commonwealth Government established an Asian Studies Council in 1986, costing more than \$800,000 a year. This Council surveyed 2500 people, including 320 companies, and reported that the teaching of Asian languages should get the same treatment as European languages in Australian schools. The editor of the NSW Teachers' Federation journal, *Education*, commented, ruefully: 'for the sake of Asian languages, we hope they don't get the same treatment'.⁴⁸

Following the November 1987 Report, *National Policy on Languages*, five new programmes were funded: the Australian Second Language Learning Program; the Adult Literacy Action Campaign; the National Aboriginal Languages Program; the Multicultural and Cross-Cultural Supplementation Program; and the Asian Languages Program.

A columnist in the *Sydney Morning Herald* questioned the need for action, pointing out that Australia had thousands of fluent Chinese speakers amongst its immigrant population. Native speakers of Japanese were less numerous but the increasing number of Japanese students in Australia was likely to get first pick of part-time jobs. The Foreign Affairs Department had only 13 jobs for Japanese speakers, compared with 73 for French. Nearly one quarter of the countries of the world, about 42, used French as their native or official language. In itself, fluency in Japanese guaranteed nothing. Language skills had to be combined with

marketing skills or training, e.g. in the hospitality industry, to be of vocational value.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, pressure for foreign languages continued.

In 1989 only 12.6 per cent of Australian Year 12 students studied one or more foreign languages. This compared with about 40 per cent in the 1960s, when a language was compulsory for entrance to some university courses. Fewer than one-quarter of all Australian primary and secondary schools offered a language other than English. At Year 12 level, 32 languages were available across Australia in 1989, the most popular being French (5906 students), German (3171), Modern Greek (2052) and Italian (2484). These constituted 70 per cent of the total, while students of Chinese (2,038), Japanese (1917), Indonesian/Malay (883) and Vietnamese (720) made up a further 19 per cent.⁵⁰

As elsewhere in contemporary education, foreign languages acquired numerous advisory bodies, curriculum development facilities and educational administrators. An Australian Advisory Council on Languages and Multicultural Education was established in March 1988 and a National Languages Institute of Australia operated from June 1990. In December the Minister, John Dawkins, issued a Green Paper, *The Language of Australia: Discussion Paper on an Australian Literacy and Language Policy for the 1990s*, which proposed that a National Literacy and Language Council replace the Australian Advisory Council on Languages and Multicultural Education and the Asian Studies Council. Dawkins affirmed that 'Australian English is our national language and the major vehicle for our literacy and language development' but he also said that the social, cultural, community and economic vitality of Australia was enriched by Aboriginal, European, and Asian languages.

The Commonwealth sustained its new initiatives with funds. In 1990-91 the Australian Second Language Program received \$7.8 million, the Ethnic Schools Program \$6.6 million, Asian Studies (Higher education) \$4.6 million, Asian Studies (Schools) \$1.3 million, Aboriginal education \$1.0 million, and Multicultural and Cross-Cultural Supplementation \$0.5 million. The National Languages Institute of Australia was allocated \$1.253 million for administrative costs.⁵¹

The strength of foreign languages in schools varied from State to State. *The Language of Australia* reported that New South Wales had identified 12 'priority languages', five of them East Asian. Victoria listed 10, four of global importance, three (East Asian) of regional importance, and three of national/domestic importance. The Northern Territory listed seven priority languages, four of them East Asian; Aboriginal languages were included, French and German were not. Queensland listed 17 languages; six, including Thai, were East Asian; Aboriginal languages were included. Tasmania, lacking a significant Aboriginal population, had an

uncomplicated list—Chinese, French, German, Indonesian, Italian and Japanese. South Australia had the same, but substituted Spanish for Italian. Western Australia followed Tasmania, but with the addition of Aboriginal languages. The ACT listed eight of the nine 'languages of wider teaching' in the *National Policy on Languages*. Two of these were East Asian.⁵²

New South Wales took the lead. The Liberal Government elected in March 1988 decided that foreign language study would become compulsory in all state high schools. But these schools had only about 900 qualified language teachers; another 160 would be needed if a compulsory second language were introduced. If the second language campaign centred on 'key trade languages, such as Japanese, Chinese and Arabic', the difficulty of providing an adequate pool of trained teachers would be even greater. A Ministry *Discussion Paper on the Curriculum* suggested that the creation of high schools specialising in languages would raise the study of modern languages from its 'abysmal levels'. It also suggested the number of languages taught should be restricted. French, German and Italian were important for cultural and economic reasons, but the emphasis, at least in the short-term, should be on 'priority languages', namely Japanese, Chinese, Spanish, Arabic and possibly Korean.⁵³

The *Discussion Paper* failed to consider the problems of supplying adequate textbooks and persuading students to enrol in difficult languages when softer options were available. It also failed to note that pupils who knew little of the grammar and syntax of their own language would be handicapped in learning a foreign one. Languages using characters, as in Japanese and Chinese, required rote learning and repetition, a style of teaching no longer favoured in Australian schools.

In February 1992, Kim Beazley, Dawkins' successor as Minister for Employment, Education and Training, asked the Australian Language and Literacy Council to review business and industry needs for languages other than English. The chairman of this Council was Rodney Cavalier, a former Labor Minister for Education in New South Wales, who had shown the strength to resist the many pressure groups operating on education. The report, *Speaking of Business* (November 1993), was sceptical about many widespread assumptions. Knowledge of a foreign language, it said, was only an ancillary skill for business, although a business person proficient in another language was likely to be more effective. Knowledge of *any* foreign language helped an understanding of foreign cultures. Business people interviewed put greater emphasis on cultural awareness than language skills. Overseas trade and tourism were two areas where language facility might be useful, but some Asian languages required a minimum of 2500 hours and probably 5000 hours of systematic study to achieve proficiency. European languages required much less. Most

students received between 400 and 600 hours of language study by the end of secondary schooling.

It was deliciously ironic, said the report, that Australian governments should discover the economic importance of languages at a moment 'when languages have never been less important on purely economic determinist grounds'. English was the most widely-used international language and the economic elites of Asia were becoming more proficient in English.⁵⁴

Commonwealth Concern Over Civics and Literacy

An alternative source of Commonwealth influence flowed from the work of the Senate and House of Representatives Standing Committees on Education, which each year surveyed the health of some aspect of Australian education. The views of these committees often differed from that of the government. One reason was that they included members of several political parties. Another was that they invited submissions from the community to help determine its reports. Two important topics which they investigated at this time were the teaching of citizenship and literacy.

The low level of political awareness in Australia, evidenced by the unimpressive celebration of the 1988 bicentenary of white settlement, aroused some concern in political and educational circles. The anniversary produced a new initiative, Australian Studies. The Bicentennial Australian Studies Schools Project remarked that 'many teachers expressed an understandable sense of confusion about what constitutes Australian culture today'. The Project endorsed Australian Studies as a basis for developing positive views.⁵⁵ The subject attracted some interest amongst progressives and made headway in Victoria and South Australia. In New South Wales history and geography teachers were able to frustrate this competitor, assisted by the fact that the study of history and geography had just been made compulsory in the junior secondary school.⁵⁶

Goal 7 of the AEC's 1989 'Hobart Declaration on Schooling' endorsed the teaching of citizenship 'to develop knowledge, skills, attitudes and values which will enable students to participate as active and informed citizens in our democratic Australian society within an international context'. In the same year the Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training presented a report, *Education for Active Citizenship*, which warned that 'the retreat into apathy and ignorance' opened the way for 'a victory of self-centredness over a sense of community responsibility'. Even by Year 12, it claimed, 'the vast majority of students have not acquired even a rudimentary understanding of important aspects of our political system'.⁵⁷ A second Senate Standing

Committee report, *Active Citizenship Revisited* (1991) reiterated this concern.

Some academics were sceptical. Proclaiming that 'Political ignorance is bliss', a lecturer at the Nepean College of Advanced Education remarked in the *Sydney Morning Herald* that 'the active citizenship which the senators want our children to learn will no doubt be based on classical liberal-democratic theory' and would encourage belief in the justice and power of the parliamentary system. But Australians know that the real power in society lies with 'bosses', capitalist, union or criminal, depending on your point of view. Their political ignorance and superficial lack of knowledge concealed a valuable heritage of truth.⁵⁸

Civics education, which had withered in the late 1960s, had been linked traditionally with the teaching of history. In June 1994 Prime Minister Keating established a 'Civics Expert Group', chaired by Professor Stuart Macintyre, the Melbourne historian, to investigate ways of revitalising civics. Its report, *Whereas the People*, acknowledged the damage changes in the study of history had inflicted on civics education.

The radicalism of the 1960s ushered in changes to the methodology and epistemology of history that hastened the decline of political and diplomatic history ... The history of empires, nations and political institutions—the stuff of traditional civics education—was supplanted by the history of women, blacks, indigenous peoples and other groups that had hitherto been neglected.⁵⁹

The Civics Expert Group recommended Commonwealth funding for civics and citizenship education.

Another heritage of the late 1960s had been the abandonment of traditional methods of teaching children to read and write; in particular, the phonic method had fallen into disfavour. In 1975 a House of Representatives Select Committee asked the Australian Council for Educational Research to conduct Australia-wide tests of basic literacy and numeracy, the results of which became known in May 1976 and aroused considerable concern.

A 1991 federal government White Paper on language and literacy estimated that one million Australians (one in seven) lacked effective English skills and that poor literacy cost Australian industry \$3.2 billion a year. The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training addressed the matter. Its report, *The Literacy Challenge* (December 1992), suggested that between 10 and 20 per cent of children were finishing primary school with literacy problems. It noted that most schools used the 'whole language or natural learning' (look-and-say, word recognition) approach to literacy learning, rather than the older phonic method. It recommended that teachers use a variety of methods,

remarked that no education system in Australia required teachers of the youngest children to have specific training to work with this group, and acknowledged that some teachers lacked the range of skills required.⁶⁰

The Ideological Contestants

The drive for curriculum reform encountered some hostility. Critics included the remnants of the radicals or semi-Marxists, now adopting the rubric of 'critical theorists'; neo-progressives, concerned with defending a child-centred activity curriculum; and defenders of 'traditional' liberal humanism, some of whom drew on Judaeo-Christian religious and moral values. Both radicals and progressives invoked the principles of 'social justice' to justify a curriculum to accommodate the interests of allegedly disadvantaged minorities.

The debate was muted by the declining strength of academic educationists. The reform movement revived the concept of 'teacher training' rather than 'teacher education' or 'teacher preparation'. Attempts at a more practical emphasis encouraged a shift of responsibility for teacher training from the universities towards the schools. This, in turn, led to the decay of academic courses such as the philosophy of education, the sociology of education and the history of education. These courses were often bastions of neo-progressive and radical theory.

Some advocates of liberal humanist education congregated around such journals as *Education Monitor*, started by the Institute of Public Affairs in 1989, and *Quadrant*. Though uneasy at the emphasis on vocational subjects, they welcomed attempts to restore rigour and enjoyed the discomfort of radical and progressive pedagogy.⁶¹ Radicals voiced their opposition to curriculum innovations in journals like *Education Links* (published in Sydney) and *Discourse* (published in Brisbane), in teacher union journals, and in academic societies, notably the Australian Curriculum Studies Association and its journal, *Curriculum Perspectives*. Progressives became strong in the previously liberal-traditional Australian College of Education, which published *Unicorn*. From Melbourne *Arena*, the quarterly 'marxist journal of criticism and discussion', provided often shrewd comments on the confusions enveloping the curriculum. The reform movement provoked a crisis of nerve amongst some progressives and radicals. Dismayed by the extremes of both neo-progressives and economic rationalists, they sometimes rediscovered the previously-scorned virtues of liberal education.

At its 1987 conference the Australian Teachers' Federation revised its 'Curriculum Policy'. It now argued that schools should not have the discretion to remove major areas of knowledge from the common curriculum. 'While needing renovation, the conventional disciplines are

also a source of knowledge that is itself empowering and useful'. Doug White of La Trobe University, a classical Marxist rather than neo-Marxist, called for 'reformation of a certain independence of schooling from society'. Education, he said, was necessarily hierarchical, recognising 'ordering levels in knowledge and society'.⁶² In the Spring 1987 issue of *Education Links* Rob White, a South Australian, grumbled at the tendency to seek minimum rather than maximum standards in state schools and asserted: 'It is absolutely essential that the Left mount a vigorous defence of "liberal education"'. Denis Fitzgerald, a NSW Teachers' Federation activist, wrote early in 1987: 'If we are serious about attracting students back to our public system we need to discard some of our thinking into the hippie dustbin of history'. He queried the concept of the 'competitive academic curriculum' popularised in the 1982 book by R. W. Connell, D. J. Ashenden, S. Kessler and G. W. Dowsett, *Making the Difference*.⁶³

Other radicals, retaining their hostility to liberal or general education, continued to view the curriculum as an avenue for the promulgation of anti-capitalist, pro-socialist beliefs. Radical sociology relapsed into a simplified semi-Marxist ideology, with touches of child-centred progressive education, both encompassed within the relativism of a pluralist society. Under the banner of 'social justice' they advocated an 'inclusive curriculum' which would meet the grievances and present the 'perspectives' of special interest groups, such as Aborigines, environmentalists, feminists and members of ethnic groups. This was despite some evidence that students from ethnic backgrounds were doing better at university than Anglo-Celts and that girls were beginning to outperform boys.⁶⁴

The residual progressives, now hardly distinguishable from the eclectic leftists, concentrated on developing the child rather than inculcating knowledge and values through subjects. They favoured integrated studies over discrete subjects because these, they believed, helped the child develop his or her potentialities.

Radical-progressive views found expression at conferences of the Australian Curriculum Studies Association and in its journal, *Curriculum Perspectives*. In 1990 the ACSA, together with the Queensland Ministerial Consultative Council on Curriculum, sponsored a conference at which the four keynote speakers, Paul Braddy, (Education Minister in the recently-elected Labor government), Archbishop Hollingworth, Professor Robert Connell, and Professor Paige Porter, examined 'the interface between a social-justice perspective on education and the economic rationalist viewpoint'. Professor Porter asserted that 'economic rationalist' policies in education neglected social justice issues and were likely to promote

'the dissolution of the notion of citizenship'.⁶⁵ The themes of its 1991 and 1993 conferences, 'Liberating the Curriculum' and 'Curriculum in Profile: Quality or Inequality', illustrated the 'critical' and theoretical approach of the Curriculum Studies Association. Many of the 'Principles for Australian Curriculum Reform' adopted at the 1991 conference were infused with a re-educationist sociology.

2. Curriculum is a social, historical and material construction which typically services the interests of particular social groups at the expense of others. Curriculum work involves identifying these interests and their relation to the curriculum and collective action to redress any disadvantage experienced by individuals and groups.

Item 3 asserted that curriculum research should promote the role of curriculum in social change and item 4 that 'curriculum work involves the identification and critique of the ideology embedded in all curriculum practice, discourse and organisation'. Item 5 tackled examining and assessment, arguing the need to understand how credentialling practices 'serve the interests of some social groups at the expense of the quality of the educational experience provided to other groups'.

There was more. The section on 'Curriculum Content' endorsed a curriculum which was relevant, which prepared for productive work, which prepared 'people' to exercise 'their political rights in a socially critical democratic society', which was 'inclusive' by recognising the contributions of all groups, which was based on 'cooperation and success rather than competition and failure', and which engaged 'people' in authentic tasks, such as acting to improve the environment, the production of art works and performances for public exhibition, and commentary and action on social issues.⁶⁶

This was a programme for social and political change, not academic education. It assumed that all social wrongs could be remedied, that schools could rectify social wrongs, and that teachers, educational theorists and educational administrators could identify those wrongs and the appropriate remedies. The 1991 'Principles' retained the congealed concepts of the 'sociology of knowledge', part of the new sociology of education of the 1970s whose credentials had declined by the mid-1980s.⁶⁷ They ignored the possibility that education had a validity in itself, that at least some knowledge was objective, with a validity independent of the social circumstances which produced it. Marx himself recognised that not all school subjects possessed a party or class interpretation. 'The rules of grammar, for instance, could not differ, whether explained by a religious Tory or a free thinker.'⁶⁸

Creative Subversion of the National Curriculum

In England conservative politicians saw the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1988 as a means of turning back the tide of progressive education. But the educational world was determined to resist the restoration of 'didactic' teaching in a subject-based curriculum and the introduction of tests which would have labelled some children (and perhaps some teachers) as failures. Many of the educationists entrusted to devise the new curriculum were progressives. The result was chaos. In June 1988, Tony Edwards, head of the education department at Newcastle University, said that the curriculum reforms offered 'ample scope for creative subversion ... there is almost everything still to play for'. Later he was appointed to the National Curriculum Council's review team.⁶⁹

In Australia, too, a struggle developed over the content of the National Curriculum, even though this was not so clearly subject-based as in England. Many of those appointed to prepare the National Statements and Profiles held progressive or radical opinions. As their proposals became known, public discontent unfaced.

In May 1993, 200 academics issued a statement attacking the National Mathematics Profile. An associate professor at Sydney University said that mathematics teaching in NSW schools was in excellent shape and that the national profile would reduce it to the standard in Victoria. The former president of the Australian Mathematical Sciences Council said that the material in the profiles was extremely difficult to understand and some of it was nonsense. The head of the School of Mathematics at Melbourne University complained that the people preparing the mathematics profile had not consulted professional mathematicians.⁷⁰

The National Science Profile, according to the Department of Physics and Mathematical Physics at the University of Adelaide, posed 'a real threat to traditional intellectual standards'; its authors 'continue to pursue their private agenda to do away with physics, chemistry, biology and geology as separate subjects in Years 11 and 12'.⁷¹ H. H. Bolotin, professor of physics at Melbourne University, attacked the science segments of the National Curriculum which, he said, were suffused with socio-educational cant about 'providing an excellent education for all young people' but contained little or nothing of substance and value. The science curriculum emphasised learning about 'the role of science and technology in society' and reconciling 'the assumptions, ethics and values currently excluded from school science' with the 'ethics of care and responsibility', but it shunned the teaching of scientific skills, the study and knowledge of the basic tools of objective investigation and observation.⁷²

Major criticisms were directed at the English Statement and Profile. In Melbourne, Kevin Donnelly maintained that the English Project Team

had accepted uncritically recent theoretical developments in English education, while Bill Hannan said that at times the English documents paid only lip service to the study of literature and over-emphasised 'pop sociology and deconstruction—the sort of stuff that is taught at university'. He pointed out the problem of talking about deconstructing literature to pupils who had not encountered literature.⁷³

Perhaps the most controversial of the National Statements was that for Studies of Society and Environment. The team preparing this, an academic from James Cook University, North Queensland, three from the Queensland Department of Education, and one from Queensland University of Technology, was assailed by the executive of the AEC's Curriculum and Assessment Committee. Indeed, one senior bureaucrat described one of the sample questions ('What interests were served by the maintenance of the Cold War conflict?') as 'left-wing, socially-critical and Marxist'. The writing team was dismissed in October 1992 and a new team appointed. Bill Hannan objected to the Studies of Society document because it lacked any real study of history, stating that 'it was little more than a subject of satire ... a case of political correctness gone wild'.⁷⁴

On the other hand, the Australian Society for Music Education criticised the Music document for its traditional character, finding it difficult, separatist, 'Euro-centric' and biased towards 'high art'.⁷⁵

The States Reject the National Curriculum

The July 1993 meeting of the Australian Education Council deferred the adoption of the National Statements and Profiles, referring the documents to a meeting of officers from each state and territory, who were to present their recommendations to the AEC in December. The AEC also rejected proposals to develop work-related skills in schools—a set-back for the Carmichael competency lobby. The cost of the national curriculum project to this point had been almost \$6.5 million.

Three main reasons explain the failure of the AEC to accept the National Curriculum. Liberal Parties or Liberal-National coalitions now governed five of the nine States and Territories, giving them a majority within the AEC. The decision not to endorse the National Curriculum Standards and Profiles was made on party lines, by 5 votes to 4. Secondly, a strong sense of 'State Rights' operated. The Departments and Ministries of Education resented the threat of further Commonwealth control over local school systems. Thirdly, serious concern about the educational value of the Statements and Profiles existed. On 2 July the *Sydney Morning Herald* commented: 'At best the profiles have a marginal educational value'; the national curriculum concept had none. *The Australian*

of 12 July remarked: 'While the profiles undeniably had their merits, they also appeared to have many weaknesses'.⁷⁶

The federal Minister for Employment, Education and Training, Kim Beazley, threatened to use the Commonwealth's financial powers to make the States accept the National Curriculum. The \$2 billion which the Commonwealth Government gave the States and Territories for education would be allocated on a tied grants system, distributed 'line by line, special item by special item'; but extreme measures were unnecessary. In December, the AEC endorsed a motion for greater co-operation between the States and Territories on curriculum issues. The Curriculum Corporation would publish the Statements and Profiles, the individual States and Territories would decide how appropriate they were for their own conditions.⁷⁷

The competencies were treated in a similar way. Prior to the July AEC meeting eight leaders of prominent industry groups had written to education and training ministers urging them to approve implementation of the Mayer 'key competencies'. On the other hand, some employers, parents and academics voiced their concern. In this respect, too, the AEC voted to allow the States and Territories to decide individually how implementation should proceed.⁷⁸

The Contested Curriculum, 1987-93

Between 1987 and 1993 the Commonwealth Government made strenuous efforts to establish a National Curriculum with a vocational bias, while New South Wales followed a rival path focusing on discrete, content-focused, subjects. Yet across Australia liberal education continued to decline as shifts occurred in the popularity and content of the various 'areas of study'. Under the banner of 'social justice', curricula sought to accommodate the 'perspectives' of various 'minorities'. 'Progressive' pedagogy, such as student-centred activity methods, also survived under the guise of the enquiry method or problem-solving. Testing of basic subjects began to be introduced and outcomes-based education spread widely, welcomed as a compromise accommodating both fixed, norm-based standards and the differing abilities and efforts of students.

In 1993 the Commonwealth's campaign for a National Curriculum lost momentum. The States and Territories reasserted their prime responsibility for the school curriculum. Attempts to stimulate new foreign languages proved ineffective. Proposals for citizenship promised a mild revival of history and geography in schools.

The pattern varied from state to state. In Queensland the victory of Labor in the December 1989 elections, after 32 years in opposition,

initiated efforts to apply social justice principles to the curriculum. In Victoria curriculum reform was energised after the accession of Jeff Kennett's Liberal government in October 1992. After the July 1993 deferment of the National Curriculum most Labor governments indicated they were likely to adopt many features of the Statements and Profiles. But in New South Wales the advent of the Carr Labor government in 1995 re-invigorated curriculum reform.

Many States introduced testing of basic subjects in the primary school and sometimes in the junior secondary years. Outcomes-based education exerted an appeal if only because it could accommodate both academic and low-level, activity-centred, education. Its character depended on what outcomes were adopted, the precise requirements set for the different school levels. If sufficiently vague, all pupils could be told that they had achieved the required standards.

At the end of the senior secondary school, examinations, usually including both internal and external components, survived. The increased proportion of lower ability students staying on till Year 12 undermined the academic quality of the curriculum—but reduced unemployment figures!

In primary education new Boards of Studies and outcomes-based education re-established a closer supervision of the curriculum. Within the blanket-category of 'Key Learning Areas' some revival of subjects, as against studies, occurred. However, integrated studies survived in many primary schools. This suited inter-disciplinary 'studies', such as environmental education.

Departments of Education began to reclaim some of their powers lost in the early years of reform. But while the influence of politicians tended to shrink, teachers did not recover the excessive curriculum responsibilities of the pre-1987 era of school-based curriculum. Opponents of reform found it was not easy to unscramble the egg.

Several factors had helped to put a brake on the momentum of curriculum reform. The hostility of teachers' unions, subject associations and academic educationists undermined reform. So did the vagaries of politics. Weak governments, with small majorities or dependent on minority groups, avoided the controversy associated with curriculum reform. While Labor governments were more inclined than Liberal to accommodate teacher unions and other special interest groups, the individual strength of particular ministers for education, or of departmental executives, or even of premiers, could affect the direction or rate of change.

The doctrine of social justice and its corollary, the inclusive curriculum, survived, despite indications that its aims had already materialised amongst some potential beneficiaries, such as girls, Chinese-

Australians and some other 'ethnic' students, but was apparently incapable of achieving the rosy expectations on a universal scale.

A plurality of factors ensured that curriculum problems would persist. In some schools the large number of students from disrupted families and the anti-intellectual influence of television and the peer group increased teaching problems. In the last resort, the quality of the teachers determines the quality of the curriculum and in state schools many teachers felt themselves under-rated by the community and unsure about the value of what they were teaching.

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