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Education as commodity? How creativity fell off the agenda and labour market factors took over. Will Gonski be the solution?

Barry Jones

AO, FAA, FAHA, FTSE, FASSA, FRSA, FRSN, FRSV, FACE

Abstract:

Australia, regarded as a great educational pioneer a century ago, faces fierce international competition, especially in our region. The Managerial Revolution and the Information Revolution have both emphasised the immediate and tangible, especially labour market demands, at the expense of creativity, imagination, reflection and lifelong learning. Training and education are treated as synonyms. Can the Gonski Report (*Review of Funding for Schooling – Final Report*, December 2011) reverse middle-class flight from public education? In a market economy, education, like health, information and sport is becoming increasingly commodified. Is the grip of retail education too strong to break? Public education has become a residual category, and middle-class flight means that those parents who could be best equipped to fight for public education (and were themselves the beneficiaries of it) are now emphasising ‘choice’ and cross subsidy by taxpayers as their priorities.

Gonski

Review of Funding for Schooling – Final Report, the work of an expert panel, chaired by David Gonski, AC, was presented to the Australian Government in December 2011 and – eighteen months later – its fate is still uncertain. By 20 June New South Wales, South Australia and the ACT were the only states/territories to sign up and there is an ambivalent at best/ hostile at worst reaction from the Coalition in the three months before an election. A fearless commitment to vested interest by the independent schools means that Gonski’s recommendation of a needs basis in funding is likely to be derailed and that bipartisan support will become impossible. Nevertheless, although agreement by Tasmania to support Gonski by the cut-off date of 30 June is likely, Western Australia and Queensland have rejected the formula and the responses by Victoria and the Northern Territory are unpredictable.

One of the major problems about Gonski is that even if all states and territories had signed on to it before 30 June serious money does not begin to flow until 2016 which will not be in the next Parliament but (mostly) in the one after that.

In the (likely) event of a change of Government in 2013 it would be easy to overturn the Gonski reforms.

I welcome the commitment to increased spending on education, following Gonski, of \$14.5 billion over six years but that figure should be seen in a broader context. Outlays in the 2013-14 Budget are estimated to be of the order of \$370 billion, so that over a six year period we might expect a figure in excess of \$2 trillion (i.e. 2×10^{12}).

The terms of reference given to Gonski by the Government were narrowly economic – emphasising the levels of public funding for the three sectors in Australian schools – government, independent and Catholic – and Australia's comparative ranking internationally, especially in science and mathematics.

‘In 2000 only one country outperformed Australia in reading and scientific literacy and only two outperformed Australia in mathematical literacy. By 2009, six countries outperformed Australia in reading and scientific literacy and 123 outperformed Australia in mathematical literacy’. (Gonski et al. p. xiii)

Australian Government expenditure on education, at 3.6 per cent of GDP, is slightly below the OECD average of 3.9 per cent.

There has been criticism of Gonski from some education researchers.

In *What's Wrong with the Gonski Report: Funding reform and Student Achievement?* Moshe Justman and Chris Ryan (2013) highlight some areas of concern. Higher spending does not in itself improve student performance, as recent decades demonstrate. The formula for determining base funding levels per student that all schools would receive is questionable. The case for a more centralised education system is not adequately argued. International comparisons may be misleading, failing to take into account social and political differences, and the Confucian models of Singapore, Hong Kong, and even Japan, may be less appropriate than European democratic, pluralistic systems.

Because the terms of reference were so narrow it is hard to blame the distinguished panel members.

There are some major areas for concern in Australian education generally, with the state system being extremely vulnerable.

Education as commodity: retail education.

In the Australia 2020 Summit (April 2008), education was classified as part of the Productivity Agenda (together with skills, training science and innovation). Of 88 people in that stream, barely a quarter would have been directly involved in primary or secondary education, but a few Vice Chancellors were tossed in. But schools – to use the contemporary jargon – were punching seriously below their weight, out gunned by union officials, business leaders and lobbyists to whom public education means training for the existing labour force, not education for creativity, personal; development and lifelong learning.

The terms training and education are used interchangeably as if they were synonyms. When politicians talk about ‘education’ they usually mean ‘training’.

As a society Australia faces a hollowing out of values. We live in the era of retail politics. Politicians no longer ask about a proposition, ‘Is it right? Is it the best thing to do?’ but instead, ‘Will it sell? How can we put a spin on it?’

In education, emphasis is on ensuring that students are trained to make a direct contribution to the economy.

Once players were amateurs, but now sport is big business, with managers, endorsements, sponsorships and multi-billion dollar media deals for the codes.

Universities have become trading corporations, not just communities of scholars. They are very important foreign exchange earners since overseas students have to pay their money up front. Private schools are significant money earners, with high fees, generous public subsidies from tax payers and salaries for some principals which far exceed remuneration for the Prime Minister or the Chief Justice of the High Court.

Australian exceptionalism: middle-class flight

In the United States ‘American exceptionalism’ is a matter of national self-congratulation – but Australian exceptionalism in education should be cause for concern. As the Gonski Report notes, in 2010 only 66 % of students attended Government [public] schools with the remaining 34 % attending non-government [private] schools, 20 % in Catholic schools (systemic and 72 non-systemic) and 14 % in independent schools, including not only high-fee paying schools but Anglican, Uniting Church, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Muslim, Jewish, Adventist, Steiner and other denominational or ethnic based schools. In the past five years Catholic schools had increased their enrolments by 6 % and independent schools by 14 %.

The OECD average for attendance in government schools is 88 %. Norway ranks highest with 98.6 % and Finland, which scores outstandingly in PISA

(Programme for International Student Assessment), rankings, has 96.1 %.
(Gonski, ch. 1, passim)

The Australian figure is far behind New Zealand, with which we might assume having the closest affinity (94.3 %), Canada (92.5 %), the United Kingdom (93.7 %), the United States (91.2 %), Germany (94.9 %) and Sweden (90.0 %). Like Australia, there are anomalies – Chile is on 42.0 %, Ireland on 38.5 %, and the Netherlands (34.0 %) and Belgium (30.5 %), are even lower.

In *The Doubter's Companion* (1994), the Canadian writer John Ralston Saul defined 'Public Education' as 'the single most important element in the maintenance of a democratic system'. I kept crusading for public education to be an instrument for personal and societal transformation. With the existing mind-set, education generally entrenches or reinforces existing abilities, or disabilities, advantages or disadvantages.

Even where parents have attended state schools themselves, once they choose to send their children to private schools they generally cease to be effective advocates for the state system. It becomes a residual category. Disturbingly, some state education bureaucrats vote with their feet in choosing private schools for their offspring. Often they say: 'I believe in the state system, but Toby and Miranda have special needs, so we send them to private schools'. Toby and Miranda have already left. Will Jason and Kylie follow? If the state system breaks down, the impact on social cohesion will be very serious.

The strength of a large, comprehensive state system is that it permits/encourages diversity *inside* school and social cohesion *outside* it, rather than cohesion inside school and diversity (often harsh or fragmented) outside it.

Should we be aiming at mass learning, or individual learning? How do we, individually, impute a value to our own time use? Or is it always conferred, externally, by a superior? What is the relationship between time management and the problems of aggression, substance abuse, boredom, alienation and depression? How do we make some subjects more exciting for teachers and students?

The Rise and Rise of Managerialism

We live in the age of the Information Revolution, but it is also the age of the cult of management, which became a dominant factor in public life, exactly as James Burnham had predicted in *The Managerial Revolution* (1941), a disturbing book long ahead of its time.

The politics (that is, serious debate on ideological issues) has virtually dropped out of politics and has been replaced by a managerial approach. Many elected 5

leaders in 2013 are not politicians in the historic sense, who campaign passionately for a set of beliefs/ values and set out to change the world: they are essentially managers or technicians who are process driven and concentrate on how systems work, or interest groups interact, and have little engagement with the history of the nation or the philosophical basis of their party. They eschew ideology and promote pragmatism.

The use of focus groups and obsessive reliance on polling and the very short news cycle means that the idea of sustained, serious, courageous analysis on a complex issue – the treatment of asylum seekers, for example – has become almost inconceivable.

Generic managers promoted the use of ‘management-speak’, a coded alternative to natural language, only understood by insiders, exactly as George Orwell had predicted.

In the 1980s Australia, like the UK, US and much of Europe, was transformed from being a ‘nation-state’ to a ‘market-state’, citizens were rebranded as customers, and their work was described as ‘product’. (The controversial 457 Visas are now described by the Department of Immigration as ‘products’.)

Education, Health, Sport, the Environment, Law, even Politics itself, are often treated as a subset of management, with appeals to naked self-interest and protecting the bottom line. At its most brutal the argument was put that there were no health, education, transport, environment, or media problems, only management problems: get the management right, and all the other problems would disappear.

As a result, expertise was fragmented, otherwise, health specialists would push health issues, educators education, scientists science, and so on.

The inexorable march of the MBAs (Masters of Business Administration) since the 1980s has had a tremendous impact inside government and corporations, leading to decisions on vital matters being determined by a managerial mindset and experience, rather than by professional expertise in relevant subject matter. It may be significant that George W. Bush was the first US President with a MBA (from Harvard).

It is striking that of eight current Directors-General/ CEOs of Education in Australia (six State, two Territorian), judging from their entries in *Who's Who in Australia*, only two (in the ACT and NT) admit to having had any teaching experience or qualifications.

Infantilisation of Debate

Debates on such issues as climate change, population, taxation, refugees, mandatory detention and offshore processing, plain packaging of cigarettes, limitations on problem gambling, and access to water, have been deformed by both sides resorting to cherry-picking of evidence, denigration of opponents, mere sloganeering, leading a trivialisation of democracy, treating citizens as if they were unable to grasp major issues.

There is a strong anti-intellectual flavour in public life, sometimes described as philistine or – in Australia – ‘bogan’, leading to a reluctance to engage in complex or sophisticated argument and analysis of evidence, most easily demonstrated in the anti-science push in debate about vaccination, fluoridation, and global warming.

Media – old and new – is partly to blame. Revolutionary changes in IT may be even more important, where we can communicate very rapidly, for example on Twitter, in ways that are shallow and non-reflective. Advocacy and analysis has largely dropped out of politics and been replaced by marketing and sloganeering. Politicians share the blame as well, as consenting adults. Serious declines in the quality of debate on public policy have also occurred in Britain, the US, Canada and Europe. The British journalist Robert Fisk, writing in *The Independent*, has repeatedly called this ‘the infantilisation of debate’.

For decades, politics has been reported as a subset of the entertainment industry, in which it is assumed that audiences look for instant responses and suffer from short-term memory loss. Politics is treated as a sporting contest, with its violence, personality clashes, tribalism and quick outcomes. An alternative model is politics as theatre or drama. The besetting fault of much media reporting is trivialisation, exaggerated stereotyping, playing off personalities, and a general ‘dumbing down’. This encourages the view that there is no point in raising serious issues months or years before an election. This has the effect of reinforcing the *status quo*, irrespective of which party is in power and at whatever level, state or federal.

Threats to Scientific/Analytical Method: Evidence v. Opinion

Scientific method, rational analysis and evaluation of evidence has been a central factor in defining Western society and culture since the 18th Century, and these skills can be/ should be applied to a variety of disciplines – politics, law, economics, social sciences, health. Scientists have come under unprecedented and damaging attack arising from the climate change controversy. It is essential to distinguish between scientific scepticism (a central element in testing evidence, for example Karl Popper’s falsifiability test) and cynicism

(dismissing evidence, however compelling, to promote confusion, inaction or vested interest.) Scientific vocations are falling in Australia, and this has important implications for our future economic and scientific capacity.

Currently, in Australia there is a disturbing conflict between evidence v. opinion ('You have evidence, but I have strong opinions') on a number of issues – climate change, treatment of asylum seekers, immunisation, fluoridated water – and political processes tend to be driven by opinion rather than evidence in short electoral and news cycles. We need evidence-based policies but often evidence lacks the psychological carrying power generated by appeals to prejudice or fear of disadvantage ('You are being robbed...', 'We are being invaded...', 'Vaccination will harm your child...', 'Global warming is a hoax...'). Not only our Parliaments but the communities in it, including our major institutions, must conduct serious, comprehensive, evidence-dependent debates, backed up with honest, detailed use of statistics, on major issues (refugees, population, water, violence, taxation, addiction, foreign policy, climate change.) Often they seem to have taken a collective vow of silence.

Pedagogy v. Education: How creativity fell off the agenda

The distinction between 'traditional' and 'current' models in education dates from Athens in the 4th Century BCE.

Education was divided into two categories, Pedagogy (one of my least favourite words) and Philosophy.

The pedagogue (παιδαγωγός, paidagōgos) was the slave who escorted children to school and I am puzzled that many who use the term have not speculated about its origin.

Is education essentially instrumental, intended to serve the needs of the economy, with the emphasis on training and predictable outcomes, or is it for the development of personal growth, imagination, creativity, wisdom, values, access to culture for the whole of life? Is education as a closed system with all the KPIs ('Key Performance Indicators') set like ducks in a row, or an open system with emphasis on creativity and individual mastery of labour/time-use value? The measurement controversy asserts that in education/ training/ pedagogy the only things of importance can be recorded precisely (while creativity cannot).

The philosopher Isocrates (not to be confused with the better known Socrates) was a practitioner of 'rhetoric', or as we would now say, 'spin'. Isocrates said that an education system needed clients or patrons who would pay for the delivery of education services and he is associated with the word 'pedagogy'. Obedience,

conformity and controllability were among the desired goals. The outcomes were certain.

Plato rejected rhetoric and pedagogy and insisted on ‘education’, the drawing out of individual talents, and encouraging the search for truth, value and meaning in life. In one system, the outcomes are predictable; in the other, they are uncertain.

Philosophy, literally ‘love of learning’, was intended to encourage the pursuit of truth, wisdom and self-discovery, irrespective of where it led. Its goals were uncertain.

In Australia in 2013, Pedagogy is the overwhelmingly dominant model but in practice it may lead to self-limitation.

Pedagogues are enthusiasts for measurement and precision and look for certain outcomes. Educators assume that the most important elements in human life are uncertain and speculative, defying precise calibration.

There must be far more emphasis on creativity, especially music and the arts, in our intellectual life. Creativity enables individuals to maintain a sense of control and wellbeing, through a process of resolving difficulty rather than by disengaging from it. The importance of creative thinking in addressing social and environmental challenges facing local and global communities needs to be acknowledged and fostered. It has also become imperative that our education system identifies how best to prepare young people for new roles and employment as the emergence of creative industries become the mainstays of our economy. Young people need to experience creativity in their teachers at schools, and outside them.

Innovation and creativity are sometimes defined as if they are synonymous. There are large areas of overlap but I think that useful distinctions can be made:

CREATIVITY

Personal
Human
Quantum Leaps
Intangible
Intuitive
Values
Subjective
Unique/ one off

INNOVATION

Process
Systemic
Linear
Tangible
Logical
Utilitarian
Objective
Replicable

e = mc ²	Edison, Ford, Bell
Non-cyclical	Cyclical
Original	Downstream
Without components	Building on components
Understanding	Outcomes oriented
No rules	Rules
Arts/Music/ Literature	78>LP>CD>DVD
Understanding existence	Productivity
Non economic	Entrepreneurial
Intellectual	Material
Hard to measure	Easy to measure
Hard to teach	Easy to teach
Partly innate	Largely experiential
Jesus, Shakespeare, Bach	Gutenberg, Wright, Marconi
Culture	Economy
Flexible	Blueprint
Subconscious elements	Conscious elements
Joyful	Aspirational

Creativity and Innovation have a profound and complex interaction, in which cause and effect are inextricably linked: touch a cause, and it changes the effect, which then changes the cause, and so on...

I would like to see greater emphasis on

- music and art, promoting creativity as central to human experience and self-discovery – encouraging left and right brain activity from infancy – and emphasising the importance of design as a major tool of understanding
- using creativity and imagination to promote linkages between the earth-bound and normative with the exceptional/numinous/transcendental/divine
- education as a transforming and enhancing experience, including self-mastery, understanding and managing time, encouraging innovative thinking, learning to learn, recognising that the goal is trying to grasp complexity and possibilities (not aiming at *certainty*)
- recognising that most humans are capable of a far higher level of performance than we generally recognise.

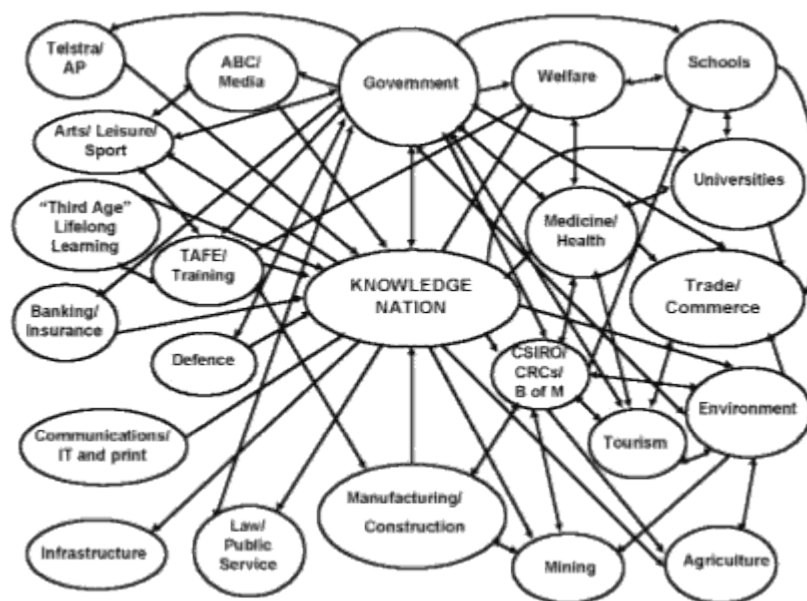
We need to promote imagination, the act of linking:

- known and unknown
- seen and unseen
- heard and unheard
- past < now > future
- here < > not here
- familiar < > unfamiliar
- self < > not self
- language/ colour/ form/ design/ sound.

Dr. Jacob Bronowski, a British scientist, mathematician, writer and television presenter said: ‘Every act of imagination is the discovery of likenesses between two things that were thought unlike’. This is central both to creativity and innovation.

Dealing with complexity

One of the most neglected areas in public policy, including education, is our failure to address complexity. The Bill Clinton mantra, ‘Keep it simple, stupid’ (KISS) is the prevailing approach. Issues in public policy – or personal development – are oversimplified to an alarming degree. One of the most scarring events of my career in public life was the vehement and entirely successful attack on my ‘complexity diagram’ in the ALP’s Knowledge National Task Force report in 2001, a graphic attempt to point out the complexity of interactions in modern government. (It was similar to, but generally less complex than, the ‘mind maps’ popularised in the UK by Tony Buzan.) The attack on the diagram was essentially, ‘But it’s too complex!’ Well, yes. That was my point.



Students tend to back away from the more challenging subjects, such as foreign languages, mathematics, music, and the enabling sciences – physics and chemistry. It appears, as the Gonski Report confirmed, that these are precisely the areas where our neighbours in China, Korea, Singapore, Japan, Taiwan, but also Finland, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Canada, are excelling.

I have been arguing for years – it is one of my primary obsessions – that the pursuit of complexity is a central element (perhaps even *the* central element) in the development of civilization, if you don't mind me reviving the use of such an elite word.

As animals, and humans, evolve and socialise, their communications develop from simple to complex. Animals communicate by grunts, cries, varieties of noises indicating fear, hunger, anger, surprise, desire. Some, notably birds and whales, have mastered song. Humans also began communicating with grunts, cries and groans, which evolved into song, long before the development of vocabulary, grammar and - later - abstract thought.

Hearing is deeply integrated in the central nervous system, even more so than seeing. In foetal development, the ear comes first, by the 45th day, months before the eye. Neurologists argue that the impact of sound penetrates the body and stirs the emotions more than our response to light, shape and colour. (I urge you to listen to Daniel Barenboim's 2006 BBC Reith Lectures 'In the Beginning was Sound': [http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00gqwcp.](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00gqwcp))

There is a continuum between living in the caves, with very primitive - communication and basic needs, and living in modern complex society – out of the caves towards, say, the Sydney Opera House or the Pompidou Centre, and at each stage the brain capacity increases, and the capacity to expand language, to deal with abstraction and develop creativity. How far along the continuum do we want to move – all the way to Bach, Michelangelo, Dostoevsky, Stravinsky, Joyce and Picasso, or do we get off at *The Biggest Loser* or *Fifty Shades of Grey*, mastering piano or violin or strumming a few chords on the guitar? The significance of the greatest music lies in its extraordinary complexity, the range of permutations and combinations which parallel, and expand, brain function, combining memorable sound and emotional power. The miracle involves a combination of labyrinthine means with a clear and unambiguous message and an inner logic. By contrast, primitive and popular music depends on simple rhythm and insistent repetition of a single message.

Tackling complexity is not merely a matter of taste but an essential evolutionary survival mechanism, which enlarges brain growth, wards off loss of cognition and delays the onset of Alzheimer's more effectively than computer games, Sudoku, crossword puzzles or jigsaws.

There is compelling evidence that, for example, ‘long-term instrumental music training is an intense, multisensory, and motor experience and offers an ideal opportunity to study structural brain plasticity in the developing brain in correlation with behavioural changes induced by training... [There can be] structural brain changes after only 15 months of musical training in early childhood, which were correlated with improvements in musically relevant motor and auditory skills.’ K L Hyde et al, Musical Training Shapes Structural Brain Development, *The Journal of Neuroscience*, June 2013.

Failure to explore music enough to grasp its complexity seems to be an outstanding area of failure in most of the state systems (Melbourne High, MacRobertson, University High, Balwyn High, Fort Street in Sydney, Perth Modern are notable exceptions.) Music is an area where the independent school system is generally a long way ahead, something illustrated in the film *Mrs Carey’s Concert* (2011), set at MLC School in Sydney.

Numbers of students in physics, chemistry and mathematics are falling as a percentage of undergraduates – and the greatest increases are in medicine, law, economics and what could be described as the marketing or packaging disciplines. History, literature, classics and philosophy departments are all under threat because they are seen as having no value except promoting self-understanding, that ‘shock of recognition’ that gives us a glimpse of what human life is about and what accountant could put a price tag on that?

Is there room in our teaching for direct contact with nature, stimulation of curiosity, creativity, appreciation of beauty, contemplating the transcendental, and understanding organisation – how processes evolve and work?

Aesthetics ought to be a central element in personal development, aiming at the Highest Common Factor (HCF) rather than the Lowest Common Denominator (LCD). The extraordinary complexity of the greatest art may help to explain the human condition: the range of permutations and combinations parallels how the brain works. Complex means are linked with clear inner logic and a simple message: everything is connected. However, the argument that there is an artistic ‘canon’ of indisputable achievements (Homer, Velázquez, Shakespeare, Mozart, Tolstoy) involving ‘rankings’, is now being fiercely attacked as repressive, Eurocentric and patriarchal, the product of ‘dead white males’. With the rise of ‘deconstruction’ (advanced by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida) and ‘political correctness’, books were now described as ‘texts’. Value systems and aesthetics are inextricably linked in a blazing controversy, which leaves mainstream education silent and embarrassed.

The pluralist or deconstructionist or postmodern theory of knowledge is contemptuous of expertise, rejects the idea of hierarchies of knowledge and **13**

asserts the democratic mantra that – as with votes in elections – every opinion is of equal value, so that if you insist that the earth is flat, reject vaccination for children or deny that HIV-AIDS is transmitted by virus, your view should be treated with respect. To the deconstructionists, the paintings of Banksy, the mysterious British graffiti artist, are just as good as Raphael, that hip-hop performances have no less significance than Beethoven's Opus 131.

Foreign Languages

Australia has a multicultural society and a monocultural education system, a disturbing paradox.

Since World War II, Australia has been a remarkably successful experiment in multiculturalism, with generally high levels of tolerance and generosity, and recent disturbing acts of violence have received extensive international media coverage, in part, I think because they are exceptions, not normative.

And yet, mainstream Australia shows surprisingly little interest in the diversity of languages and cultures to be found on our continent. One of the hardest questions to ask an Australian politician would be: 'What is Australia's second language?' The 2011 Census gives the answer: Mandarin first (1.6 %), followed by Italian, Arabic, Cantonese and Greek. 23.2 % of people in Australia speak a language other than English at home.

How many foreign languages are taught in our schools, and how many students speak them with confidence, let alone mastery? Of course, since 300 languages are spoken in Australia there should be serious debate about what languages will be taught at school. We are far from the challenge of the bilingual society, such as Canada or Belgium, where there is a clear second language. Should our choice be based on history/ tradition, cultural, regional, economic or ethnic? I learned Latin and French at school because they were part of the English tradition– and Russian at Saturday morning classes and am a dismal non-performer in all three, although I read French reasonably well.

How many languages have any of our Prime Ministers spoken? Edmund Barton was competent at Latin. Stanley Bruce had a working knowledge of French. Kevin Rudd has outstanding Chinese. None of the others could use a second language.

The quantum paradox in education

Currently, in Australia, we are part of by far the best educated cohort in the nation's history. The 2011 Census indicated that 3.5 million people in the population have bachelor's degrees or higher, about three times the number of blue-collar workers. Just over 1,015,000 people (about 900,000 of them

locals) are currently studying at Australian universities, both undergraduate and postgraduate. This educational abundance ought to mean that the conduct of our politics and public institutions generally are carried out at an unparalleled level of sophistication – really ‘world’s best practice.’ That’s what the numbers suggest. The cold, hard reality suggests something different.

Lindsay Tanner contends that 1993, when he was elected to the House of Representatives, was the high point of rationality in Australian politics but by 2010, when he left, it had sunk to an abyss of populism, despite our rising participation rates in education.

Higher education is under attack, judging from the 2013 Federal Budget and the cuts to research were serious and self-defeating. Politically, universities are seen as a soft target and no political leader expects to see reprisals for the cuts.

Oddly, there are seen to be votes in schools (because of their relationship to particular marginal electorates), not in tertiary institutions. Research, other than medical research, is often seen as too remote, too specialised, too abstract. Sir Gus Nossal often quotes something I observed years ago, that Australia seems to be the only country in the OECD where the word ‘academic’ is always used in a pejorative sense.

Despite Australia’s high percentage of people who have completed degrees, there are significant social indicators that suggest our society may be slipping backwards. For example we rank (according to *The Economist*), as the world’s most serious gamblers. We are second only to the US in consumption of junk food and levels of obesity (up 15 % in three years). There is a growing incidence of binge drinking, use of hard and recreational drugs. Imprisonment rates are rising and so are domestic violence, suicide, road rage, motor cycle gangs, body piercing and tattooing. (At least tobacco use is declining, although still rising with females).

I hesitate to put the proposition that the relationship between graduate numbers in the community and the quality of political debate is inverse, but it could be seriously debated. We appear to be lacking in courage, judgment, capacity to analyse or even simple curiosity, except about immediate personal needs.

Who would, or could, argue that the quality of political debate in the 2010 Commonwealth elections was superior to 1972 or 1983? And yet in those earlier years we only had a small proportion of the population who finished secondary, let alone tertiary, education.

The concept of contested ideas and the dialectic (thesis > antithesis > synthesis or resolution), the essence of Socratic method has become obsolete. Now our leaders are told, not to argue a position and respond to questioning, to ‘stay on message’, endlessly repeated and not be diverted by questions. We hear ‘Polls are irrelevant. The only one that counts is on election day’, or ‘Turn back the

boats!’ or ‘This toxic tax’.

In the challenging period when I chaired the Victorian Schools Innovation Commission (2001-05), the State Government was planning a major consolidation of the state’s legislation on education and VSIC was invited to make a submission. I spent a long time examining the legislative framework for education in many nations, states and provinces and was struck by the fact that none even attempted to define education, even in summary form. VSIC adopted my long and comprehensive (but, I think, defensible) definition and we put it in our submission.

It read:

Education is a combination of processes, both formal and informal, that stimulate the growth of mental capacity, influence the potential of humans, aim at individual development, understanding, and independence, encompass the teaching of specific skills and nurture knowledge, judgment, values and wisdom, transmit culture and social adaptation, but also encourage exploration, self-discovery, using time effectively and learning for a lifetime, strengthening self-image, and encouraging creativity, balance, open-mindedness, questioning, respect for others and humane common sense.

Of course the definition did not appear in the Educational and Training Reform Bill (2006). I suspect that our proposed definition of ‘Education’ may have been the final nail in VSIC’s coffin, because it did not pay enough homage to instrumentalism, managerialism and pedagogy, and was too open, too speculative, too Platonic. Managers love pedagogy but are deeply suspicious of education.

It is instructive to compare the quality of debate in the Victorian Legislative Assembly on the Education Act in 1872 with the debate in 2006. The 2006 Education and Training Reform Act incorporated the 1872 parent Act, taking account of all the amendments since then, and the community was invited to submit papers on the proposed changes. After 133 years one might have hoped that the debate would be of higher quality than in 1872, when the MPs (all male) included only a handful of graduates. Hansard does not suggest it. In 1872 the Minister (Wilberforce Stephen) argued that his legislation was ‘altogether a new experience as regards the British race’. Nobody made a comparable claim in 2006 and not one media outlet reported the debate.

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