366

JAMES COOK UNIVERSITY OF NORTH QUEENSLAND

ANNUAL MEETING OF CONVOCATION

UNIVERSITY HALL, SATURDAY, 13 NOVEMBER 1982

EDUCATION: WHERE ARE WE GOING?

The Hon. Mr. Justice M.D. Kirby
Chairman of the Australian Law Reform Commission
Deputy Chancellor, University of Newcastle (N.S.W.)
Member of the Australian National Commission for UNESCO*

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AMALGAMATION

I am Deputy Chancellor of the University of Newcastle in New South Wales. Two weeks ago, I visited the University of New England at Armidale. Today I am here at the James Cook University of North Queensland.

What do these three Universities have in common, apart from their membership of the proud fraternity of Australian universities, itself part of the international community of scholars?

Each of the universities I have mentioned is a small university. Each is outside the main metropolitan area of its State. Each is vitally important to its region: a source of pride to those Australians, few and declining in number, who do not inhabit the capital cities. Each has been closely concerned with teacher education. Each has had to look in recent years to the Commonwealth rather than the State for funding of capital and recurrent costs.

And within a year, each of these small, distinguished universities has been faced with the obligation to proceed to amalgamation with a College of Advanced Education, at uncomfortable speed and under the pressure of the withdrawal of Federal funds. The Commonwealth has at last presented the chips. The old constitutional adage 'he who pays the piper, calls the tune' has been borne out once again.

In James Cook's case (and in the case of the University of Wollongong) there had been earlier discussions about amalgamation of some kind. Though the Commonwealth forced the pace, and though there are misgivings in many quarters, the amalgamation legislation has been enacted. It is a reality. When the unthinkable becomes inevitable, it does not take long for the human mind to adjust and to find it acceptable - possibly, in the end, even desirable.

In the case of the University of New England, the rancour is deep. Angry demonstrations have met the visits of Senator Peter Baume, Commonwealth Minister for Education: a civilised university man himself who is caught up in the painful process of enforcing economies which are declared to be rational and appear another price of the economic downturn that grips Australia.

The growth and growth of the Commonwealth's influence in tertiary education is a remarkable tale. It began with modest post-War efforts of the Chifley Government to ensure, by scholarships, that the children of the poor could have a chance at university. It expanded and flourished under the Menzies Government, with the establishment of institutions to regularise the Commonwealth involvement and to plan and co-ordinate the expenditure of funds hitherto undreamt of. During the Whitlam Government the Colleges of Advanced Education came into their own and university expansion continued. In hard times, we are now all feeling the pinch.

The University of Newcastle, like the University of New England, opposes amalgamation. The Council of the University and the Council of the Newcastle College have recorded and reiterated their opposition. Each has protested at what it sees at the unseemly haste of an educational marriage forced without adequate opportunity for consultation, under the pressure of the purse and without consultation with the region or apparent care for the impact on aggregate higher education in the Hunter.

Ministers do their sums. University Councils pass their resolutions. Vice-Chancellors protest. Professor David Caro, the new Vice-Chancellor of the University of Melbourne told a conference on University-Government relations in August that relations between the universities and the governments of Australia were not as they should be:

> 'Autonomy is still considerable in Australia compared with, for example, Europe. But there have been threats to it, despite the Minister's contrary assertion'.[1]

Professor Caro mentioned the Commonwealth's instruction to Deakin University in Victoria to stop teaching engineering as an example of the infringement of university autonomy. Perhaps there was a need for rationalisation of engineering studies. But the way things are done in a free society may be as important as what is done. If a Commonwealth Government under a civilised Minister and in the name of the principles of the Liberal Party - successors to the Menzies concern about education - can halt an engineering school, what could be done by an insensitive Minister, pursuing an opinionated and intolerant program in troubled times? Could he forbid the teaching of Russian? The establishment of a School of American Studies? The use of English textbooks? It is often said that lawyers are obsessed with precedents. Sometimes this is so because of the tendency of history to repeat its errors.

Professor Caro also mentioned the Victorian Post-Secondary Education Act as an indication that all threats do not come from Canberra. He described that State Act as 'probably the most dangerous threat of all'.[2] It requires universities to refer to the Victorian Post-Secondary Education Commission all communications with Federal funding bodies. These developments, Professor Caro predicted, would colour the new alignment of the relationships between the independent universities and the governments who, in hard times, had suddenly discovered the power of the purse.

In this University, the Vice-Chancellor Professor Back told the same meeting in Melbourne that similar problems were faced in Townsville:

> 'A few days [after 20 August 1981, the State Minister] announced that State Cabinet had decided, because of Commonwealth pressure, the merger would come into effect on 1 January 1982. He further announced that he would take the final draft of the new legislation to Cabinet on the following Monday, that there would possibly be a clause to give the Minister an overseeing role and that the new university could possibly be called the "James Cook University and North Queensland University of Technology or Advanced Education". This announcement sent shock waves through the University. It seemed that its worst fears were realised, namely that the structure and function of the University were to be changed;...that there would be a significant erosion of University autonomy. Tensions hightened in both College and University staff, attitudes became polarised, rumours abounded and members of State Parliament as well as Cabinet Ministers were subject to pressures from all sides. Finally after two and a half months of uncertainty and very little consultation a Bill was introduced into the Queensland Parliament, allowed to remain on the table for seven days, and then

> passed, despite protests from the University over certain features, one of most concern being the clause which gave the Minister the power to resolve any dispute between the University Council and the BAE in respect to the ongoing advanced education courses'.[3]

Some of the earlier fears about the loss of the University's autonomy were not borne out in the legislation as enacted. But the lesson is clear. Governments are now asserting the right to intervene in universities. The intervention goes beyond management and administration. It now extends into courses. It is the price our Australian universities must pay for their heavy, almost exclusive, dependence upon governments for funding. Save for the long established Universities of Sydney and Melbourne, and possibly one or two others, Australian universities have never attracted great financial support from their alumni, from business or from research institutions and foundations, such as occurs in North America and, to a lesser extent, Europe. As in social security, we in Australia have looked to Government. We are now facing one of the consequences.

What can universities do about these moves, to ensure adherence to the liberal traditions of autonomy - particularly on academic matters? How will the future balance be set between a Government, protective of public funds and a university wishing to offer this or that academic course? Frankly, I do not think that the great mass of the Australian community could care less about the universities' predicament. Australians have enough worries on their mind without having to think about universities - places they sometimes see as extensions of the private school system, privileged places, they wrongly think, for a minority, privileged group who do not mix too well and whom they see from time to time engaged in protests and other misbehaviour.

The Managing Director of David Syme & Co., Ranald Macdonald, told the recent dinner of the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee that the universities were simply failing to promote themselves adequately[4]:

> 'The information or public relations personnel are still seen as a fairly low branch on the institutional tree and are charged with disseminating the good news and avoiding the bad. Yet, communication professionalism is essential if the university message is to be heard above the hubbub of competing messages. Most other institutions are using the best communications skills available to ensure a sympathetic environment for their operations. Universities shackle their public affairs units at their peril'.[5]

I am sure Mr. Macdonald made a good point when he criticised the persisting tendency amongst academics (or any professionals for that matter) to be suspicious or derisory of their colleagues who seek to communicate in simple language to the general community whose taxes support their salaries. Science in Australia owes a disproportionate debt to Dr. Robyn Williams of the A.B.C. Science Unit. But many other scientists either will not or cannot communicate on his program.

What conclusions should we draw from all this? The Commonwealth has recently flexed its educational funding muscles. Many university people are concerned about the principle of the interference in academic instruction. They ask where it will lead. Many are worried about their own careers. Students are concerned that their institutions will become known as second-rate - a kind of hybrid Unicol.[6] Alumni and good citizens should, I think, be concerned about the timing, the method of enforcement and the lack of appropriate consultation that has typically marked recent efforts to force amalgamations. The Commonwealth's assumption of responsibility in education is now an established feature of Australia. It is a bi-partisan policy. Concern about the state of education is a legitimate national concern, whatever the Founding Fathers may have envisaged. But it does seem to me that with the Commonwealth's growing assumption of the financial responsibility must come a commensurate determination to achieve expertise and knowledge in the field of education. It is also essential that the newly found power should be exercised in ways sensitive to our academic traditions and to the careers of the students, teachers and researchers who are affected. Great power requires commensurate expertise. Decisions in education are not of the same quality as decisions to close down a small arms factory or to rationalise an urban development plan. More attention should be paid to the educational needs of the community served by tertiary institutions. And that means more time and more consultation before decisions are made.

EDUCATIONAL RETENTION

Last week we heard some shocking statistics from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. It related to unemployment in Australia. You will be relieved to know that I do not propose address this gloomy subject. But almost as gloomy are the figures produced regularly by the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development in Paris concerning Australia's educational retention rates. Put bluntly we are not doing well in comparison with other comparable countries of the O.E.C.D. Somehow, we are not retaining young people in education, whether it be secondary or tertiary - TAFE, CAE's and universities. At 17 years Japan has 86% of its population still in education. The United States has 83%. We in Australia can barely muster 40%.

At last our leaders are becoming properly concerned about these depressing statistics. It was announced yesterday that the Commonwealth Department of Education will begin a $300,000 national advertising campaign on Monday to try to increase the number of students on the Secondary Allowance Scheme.[7] The aim is to increase the number of students staying on at school and matriculating with their Higher School Certificates. Australia's national retention rate for high school students to Year 12 was given as only 35% compared with a 90% retention to Year 12 in Japan and the United States. This is a worthy initiative of Senator Baume. It deserves our strong support.

The Prime Minister, Mr. Fraser, in August 1982 called for the States to consider raising the minimum school leaving age pointing out that 'far too many young Australians' left school as soon as they legally could and were disadvantaged 'because of the growing demand for skills for jobs'.[8] Mr. Fraser's solution was rejected by Education Ministers and officials. The State Minister for Education in Victoria, Mr. Fordham saw a political opening:

> 'It's blatantly obvious that this is just a device to cover up the unemployment statistics that will be there for all to see at the end of this current year....To suggest that just simply to retain these children at school is going to solve the major social and economic problem facing this country is ludicrous'.[9]

Dr. Norman Curry, Director-General of Education in Victoria, was more circumspect:

> 'I think it is important that children be encouraged to stay in school as long as possible. But the answer does not lie in raising the minimum leaving age...It is important to provide the right type of education for the needs of different people. But to force a child to stay at school is not going to do any good for that child or the school if the child is being forced to stay'.[10]

Professor Peter Karmel added his voice to the debate by telling a national TAFE conference that a major thrust of Australian youth policies would require:

* keeping people at school longer;
* encouraging greater participation in higher education;
* providing apprenticeship type opportunities; and
* rationalising financial support for young people.[11]

Professor Karmel pointed out that the price of trying to retain more Australians in education was that the curricula of schools and tertiary institutions would have to be modified so that general education can be offered in ways that are, and are seen to be, more relevant to young people.

QUALITY NOT JUST QUANTITY

Whilst the calls go out for relevancy and interest in curricula, competing calls are now being heard. A report in early September 1982 assessed that up to 10% of Australian adults lack reading and writing skills necessary to cope with everyday living. A national survey found that more than a million Australian adults had serious difficulty in performing such tasks as reading a telephone directory, street sign or filling out forms. Such people were considered 'functionally illiterate'.[12] The Melbourne Herald asked in puzzlement:

> 'How can it have happened with more than a century of free, compulsory and increasingly costly education? To what exploitation are the unfortunate sufferers subjected?'[13]

The Chairman of the Australian Broadcasting Commission, Professor Leonie Kramer had her say last week. She said that the problem lay in teacher training:

> 'There is not a more important profession [than teaching] and none is easier to enter'.[14]

Professor Kramer said that teacher unions had concentrated on what she described as 'political grandstanding' and had made the mistake of believing 'that money solves everything'.[15] Her call reflects recently reported moves in France to abandon the relaxed school curriculum of the 60's and 70's and to return to a basic core studies with and concentration on skills of literacy and numeracy. Similar moves are now reported in the United States, where the problems of education in that country have been ascribed recently to 'the legions of incompetent teachers...even more distressing...than the laxity of curricula standards'.[16]

Yet whilst many parents and some educational experts, call for a return to the 'three R's', others, who should know, caution against increasing 'vocationalism' in tertiary and secondary education in Australia. Professor John Passmore recently observed:

> 'There is no period at which vocationalism was more stupid than it is now, because one has not the slightest idea of what occupations are going to be available in 20 years'.[17]

Little wonder that with the assault of competing opinions, tugging in different directions teachers have now joined police in complaining about the added stress of their job today. Is it a sign of the times that the welfare unit of the Victorian Teachers Union has set up a weekly health program staffed by a general practitioner and a consulting psychologist to help teachers suffering from stress?[18] A report by a La Trobe University sociologist, Dr. Rosemarie Otto, found recently that 71% of teachers surveyed in six Melbourne technical schools showed high or some stress from work pressure.

PRIVATE AND PUBLIC SCHOOLS

And to add to all these questions we must now face the public v. private schools debate - rising like a phoenix, when everyone thought the issue was dead. It does seem that parents are now turning, in increasing numbers, to the country's 2,200 non-government schools. The private school sector now enrolls about 711,000 of the country's three million school children - almost one in every four.[19] Since 1977, private schools have begun to move out of the slump they had fallen into between 1966 and 1976. Enrolments in Catholic schools in New South Wales last year rose to a record figure of 209,910. Numbers attending State schools actually dropped by more than 18,000. Accompanying the drift in numbers there has been a marked increase in Federal funding to the private sector.[20]

I have previously drawn attention to the marked drift from the public to the private school sector in Federal funding since 1976 Federal funding of private education now makes up 18% of the total. Earlier this year the Federal Government announced a boost of Federal funding for private schools by 7.7% against a real increase to public schools of 2%. But Senator Baume insisted:

> 'The Commonwealth education policy is quite clear. We wish to promote genuine freedom of choice and equality of opportunity...'[21]

I suspect that this divisive issue will continue to attract more and more attention in the months ahead. The announcement of the Federal Opposition's intention to reduce Federal funding of advantaged private schools[22], is only the first shot across the bow. An editorial in The Australian recently observed:

> 'The argument put so persistently by the private school lobby is that parents have a right to exercise choice in the education of their children. But the question this country will have to face is whether it can afford to fund two parallel, high quality systems of education. How far is it prepared to fund private schools at the expense of the "official" system - the government schools which must cater for all, irrespective of religion, social status or abilities'.[23]

The reality in many private schools is that parents do not choose them. Parents may aspire. But if their children do not fit intellectually, socially, religiously or ideologically (or all of these) they will not be enrolled or retained.[24]

And now we in the universities are observing development in the schools which should surprise none of us. Comments are now being made on the lack of accountability imposed on schools accepting State or Federal aid to ensure the achievement of 'perceived social values'.[25] And this week, Senator Baume was reported, in an answer in Parliament to have suggested the price of private schools receiving public funds is very likely going to be an increasing insistance that they make themselves publicly accountable for the government funds they receive. In reply to a question, Senator Baume said that the Commonwealth Schools Commission was now investigating the possibility of obliging private [and public] schools to provide full details of how public money was spent each year.[26] Is this a familiar tune? Do the private schools, with their boasted independence, hear, as the tertiary institutions have, the Commonwealth piper's melody?

The Commonwealth piper calls many a tune. It is vital that all who are concerned about education in Australia should be listening. All who are worried about the declining educational retention. All who are concerned about the declining real value of student assistance. All who are worried about the decline in the amount of post-graduate research in Australia. All who are anxious about 'efficiency' of amalgamations which are pressed on without much consultation and according to principles other than educational principles. All who troubled by levels of illiteracy in Australia. And by the drift of numbers and funds to private education.

The government melody is seductive. Let us hope it becomes more harmonious!

FOOTNOTES

* The views expressed are personal views only.

1. The Age, 17 August 1982.

2. ibid.

3. A.J.C. Back, 'University-Government Relations', Conference Papers, Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, Conference on University Government Bodies, Issue No. 7, Uni. of Melbourne, 15 August 1982, mimeo, 12-17.

4. The Age, 18 August, 9.

5. ibid.

6. See e.g. discussion by B. Williams, Vestes, 1980 (vol. 23 no. 2) of statements by Dr. Ron Parry. cf Back, 17.

7. Details appear in the Sydney Morning Herald, 12 November 1982, 10.

8. The Age, 23 August 1982, 5.

9. Melbourne Herald, 23 August 1982, 6.

10. ibid.

11. The Age, 30 August 1982, 1.

12. The Age, 6 September 1982, 1. See also D. Dymock, Australian Council for Adult Literacy (UNE), Adult Literacy Provision in Australia: Trends and Needs.

13. Melbourne Herald, 6 September 1982.

14. As reported in the Australian, 10 November 1982, 26.

15. ibid.

16. P. Keisling, Washington Monthly, quoted Time, 6 September 1982, 63 ('Quality, not just Quantity').

17. The Australian, 20 October 1982.

18. The Age, 19 August 1982.

19. Cf G. Maslen, School Ties: Private Schooling in Australia, 1982, 29.

20. The Australian, 7 October 1982, 3.

21. The Age, 12 October 1982.

22. Sydney Morning Herald, 28 October 1982, 1.

23. The Australian, 8 October 1982.

24. K.R. McKinnon, 'Bringing Life to Private Schools and their Problems' in the Age, 7 September 1982 (Book review of Maslen, n 19 above).

25. McKinnon, ibid.

26. The Australian, 10 November 1982.