

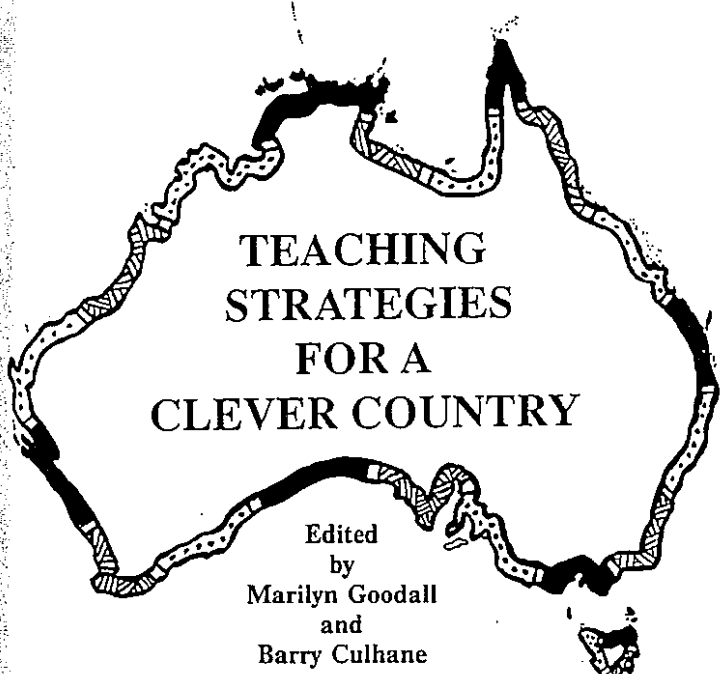
THE DREAM OF EQUAL OPPORTUNITY IN EDUCATION

ADDRESS TO AAEGT NATIONAL WORKSHOP

APRIL 5 MELBOURNE

IN TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR A CLEVER COUNTRY

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TEACHING
STRATEGIES
FOR A
CLEVER COUNTRY

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THE DREAM OF EQUAL OPPORTUNITY IN EDUCATION

An address given by Justice Michael Kirby to Participants at the AAEGT National Workshop "Teaching Strategies for A Clever Country", Monash University, April 5, 1991

SPREADING THE DREAMS OF EDUCATION

Let us begin with the Irish poet, W.B. Yeats. Let us forget that we are here at a conference. Let us just enter for a moment, the realm of the spirit, which is the most precious gift which education can stimulate. To the gifted, the talented and for all our fellow citizens:

*Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half-light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.*

A dream that I have is of a country of equal opportunity, truly egalitarian, including for those (a forgotten minority) who have gifts and talents which they deserve to build in themselves, to extend to their fellow citizens and to the world.

This morning as I went to work at 5am my taxi driver was an Argentinian. He said to me: "I came to this country ten years ago. I was trained as an architect. And why did I come? I came to this country because in Argentina all the architects were driving taxi cabs. I came to Australia. And now I'm driving a taxi cab." That is an obvious waste of talent, and it pained me to hear of it. But there are others who are wasted.

It is important in any task, whether it is in the daily life of the court or in a school, or wherever we are, to try to see our problems and our issues in a wider focus. Sometimes it is useful to have people from outside our own disciplines to look at our problems. I certainly find this in the law. They can give you a different aspect of the prism, a different reflection of the diamond: so that you can see the problem in a new light. Well, I say tonight that we should try to see the issue of the education of gifted and talented children in our community in the light of the geo-political situation of Australia in the world today. We should try to understand the predicament of our economy which was illustrated by the Argentinian architect who drove me to work so many hours ago.

A CLEVER IDEA - A CLEVER COUNTRY

Just before the last election Mr Hawke, in a brilliant move, said that the object of his new government, the re-elected government, would be to recognise that Australia had gone through its phase as a "lucky country". It would have to rebuild itself as the "clever country". The election was close. The numbers of votes that changed the government, or did not change the government were very few. Who knows but that that idea, which was written into the policy speech at a late stage, made all the difference. I understand it was the idea of the government's science adviser, Professor Ralph Slatcher. That little catch phrase, to make us "the clever country", may have been the jingle or the electoral call that made the difference for Labor between winning and losing the election.

It is a clever idea. And it is a right idea. It is a very un-Australian idea. We have grown up in a country which prides itself on lopping down the tall poppies, on looking on the egg heads with disdain. For Australians by and large, the word intellectual is a word of derision. How different from many other countries, especially, say, France. It is a rather un-Anglo view. To be an intellectual, or worse still, to be an academic (words of derision). Yet here was the Prime Minister of Australia in a close-fought election campaign, appealing to a sense of idealism and a sense of vision, that we must make our country "a clever country".

In the recent March statement on the economy, Mr Hawke further said that we just have to change things. I think if we look at our economic predicament, most citizens realise that we are a country in decline. We are a country in economic decline. Today this truth is at last dawning. We must do something about it.

At the beginning of the century we, with Argentina, were countries with the highest GDP per capita in the world. Now look at Argentina. The notion that Australia is now, likewise, in decline, is, I think, one which should arrest us. In the economic statement, the assertion was made that we have to learn from those countries which are successful economically. Is it not an irony that the countries most successful economically were those which were destroyed in the Second World War? The Prime Minister said (and I believe that he is right) that we must learn from the countries which are succeeding. Who are they mostly? They are Germany, where people will tell you directly what they think, but work hard and with imagination. And Japan, where they still work hard with imagination, but tell you delicately what they think you want to hear. This was the assertion: differences in culture, and in approach. But the common thread between these successful "clever countries" is that these are two countries which have proved themselves resilient.

We must look at what are the big issues facing our country. They include: our situation in the world, our situation as an economy, and where we are headed as we enter the twenty-first century. As a multi-cultural society with great natural gifts. With a very diverse people with many wrongs to be righted. But with a continent that we occupy, and which we must deserve to govern.

THE CONFUCIAN RENAISSANCE

Just before Christmas, Barry Jones, who is a national treasure (he's an intellectual, and not ashamed of it) said to me that I must read a new book. Whenever Barry Jones tells me that, it is generally a book on quantum physics, the life of Ervin Schrodinger, on Chaos theory, mathematical formulae or a heavy little piece on fractals. This time, he said, "this is a very thin book. You can take it away to a conference. You can read it during the boring bits." And so I struggled to get this book. It is quite difficult to get. But I bought it. Here it is, a hundred and nine pages: *The Confucian Renaissance*. It is a book about one of the two societies which the Prime Minister put before us as examples to which we must look to try to find the secret for our own future.

The book is the story of what the authors, two former officers of the Australian Foreign Service, with a deep knowledge of Asia, have distilled in a hundred pages. It represents the wisdom and experience of twenty years of working in the region. It is a book about why China and the Four Dragons are set forth to win the twenty-first century.

If you look at the issues which will confront us in the twenty-first century they include the breakdown of states and the assertion of the rights of peoples. We are seeing that phenomenon right along the perimeter of the Soviet Union and elsewhere. The rise and rise of fundamentalist religion, whether it's Hinduism or Islam especially, or as these authors say, the return in China and the Four Dragons (South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore) to the fundamental ethic of the Confucian philosophy; of Confucius and the hundred philosophers who followed him to lay down the ethic of the societies of North Asia.

The thesis of the book is very simple. It has relevance to our conference. The thesis is that these are societies with a different value system. They are societies which rest, not so much upon the individual, but upon the community. They rest, not so much upon human rights, as upon human obligations. They rest, not so much upon the rule of law, but on the rule of wise men. So these are very different value systems from our own.

One of the keys to the success of the Confucian Renaissance and the economic advancement of these societies, according to the authors, is their dedication to excellence in education. We see this in the societies of Singapore, Japan. The strong competitiveness, the strong search for excellence, the unabashed embrace of the need to maximise the gifts and talents of their best students. This book demonstrates that this is nothing new. It is really just tapping the basic philosophies of the North Asian societies.

LIFE IN THE AUSTRALIAN SUNSHINE

Now, we are a different country. We are a country with a different ethic. We are a country which probably would not wish to embrace the same enthusiasm for competitiveness that exists in the education systems of China and the Four Dragons. We read with a degree of horror, the stories of the suicide rates in Japanese students.

Indeed, recent research in Australia shows that there has been an increase in youth suicide in this country, though generally not due to the pressure of education, but simply out of despair. But the lesson of the book is clear. If we look at the puzzle of the success of these societies and of the comparative decline of our own, the answer is not hard to find. It exists, in part, in their dedication to excellence in education without embarrassment, because they realise that by maximising the talents of the gifted in their community in schools, they will not only advance the gifted, they will advance the imagination, the economy and the civilisation of their whole community.

We in Australia live in the sunshine. We have a different ethic. The authors say that, to the extent that the peoples of North Asia think of us (which is not much), they tend to think of Australia as a somewhat mediocre country. A country which embraces a sort of philosophy of mediocrity. A society which is embarrassed about excellence; which decries the intellectual; which does not celebrate its victories of the mind and the intellect. And so when I think of my taxi driver this morning, a man with much to offer to our country, I think of the many others like him, men and women in our country who are not being used to full advantage. Then I think of what is going on in our region. And there is a lesson there for us.

The authors say that, to the extent that the peoples of North Asia think about us, they think of Australia as a sort of left over from the British Empire. We are a people on a big island on the far side of the world; most of whose ancestors came from the British Isles and settled here. Others have come since. We joined the Aboriginal people, whom we then treated shamefully. But then, just as we were situated here, the Fleet went back. The sun went down on the Empire. And here we are, possessors of a big continent. But the question is: do we deserve it? We are certainly in this part of the world. We must find our identity. We must find it especially in relationship to our neighbours. We must look to their successes. And we must do more than merely regret our decline.

So when I look at the issue of gifted and talented children, and people of gifts and talents in our society, and I think of the failure to maximise those gifts, it seems to me that it is very relevant to remember what the Prime Minister said in his economic statement. Our most precious resources in Australia are the talents of our people. We start with many advantages. We start with the English language, which is the international language. We start with proud institutions of high learning and research, though with inadequate numbers and financial support. We have many things going for us. And yet we are in decline. We have to stop the decline. We will only do so if we understand its causes and see our country in its context.

ANSWERS FOR THE DEVIL'S ADVOCATE

I said to Maureen Robinson today, that it is a shame, in a way, that we do not have a devil's advocate at this workshop. We, who are dedicated to the idea of the rights of gifted and talented, simply meet together and exchange our own thoughts. We are all of a like mind. It runs the risk of becoming like a mutual admiration society. We may not be tested. We may not have our ideas put to the test. She said: "Look I've spent twenty years dealing with people who have been criticising. We all know that there are many critics of the notion, in our community. I don't need any more."

But what would our critics say against our thesis? First they say (and it is true), that it is very difficult to determine who are "gifted" and who are "the talented". They say it is very difficult to determine such things at a particular age. Give it a couple of years and there are others who might have it. They are the late starters. All of that is certainly true.

And they say, it is very sad to break up a family and send some to a selective school, or stream some and not the others. Will not the others then feel second rate?

And it is sad for the teachers who lose the cream out of their classes and who then see the best pitted against each other in the Japanese and Singaporean mode. That may be all very well for their societies, but might it not be bad for those students who are left behind? Who feel second rate? Who feel that they are not given the stimulus that might lead to their maximising their talents?

Now all of these are legitimate problems. I remember when I did my IQ tests, my mother took me in to the Education Department. I saw these little forms and these people with dust coats going around giving them out. You had to tick squares and fill in the boxes. I was then nine. How was I to know how to do this? Of course we now know that the IQ tests were biased against people whose first language is not English. They were biased against people with different skills. We may not have been the best choice in the gifted and talented at all!

It is true that all these problems exist. We must recognise them. But the fact remains that our community, rightly, gives special education to people with disadvantages. If it is difficult to choose the gifted and talented there should be more research to find out who are the gifted and talented, and who will benefit from streaming and particular educational extension. It is not a reason for abandoning the effort. It is a reason for increasing our research into what we should be doing.

The hardest battle that we have as people with a great idea, is the battle, in egalitarian Australia, of convincing our fellow citizens that we are not an elitist band who are concerned with a few bright children who will get ahead anyway. That we are not a far-right group of conservative people who just want to go back to the old days of education. That is certainly how some people would look on the people who are grouped here. So let us confront that criticism directly.

OPPORTUNITY IN EDUCATION EQUAL TO TALENT - A HUMAN RIGHT

For me, the equal opportunity for the gifted and talented is nothing less than a matter of human rights. It is nothing less than the right of people who, by genetic chance, have skills or gifts to make the most of their precious life. We have one life. It is our right as human beings, whoever we are, to make the most of it. Unless we are lifted in our spirit, and in our opportunity, then we are stunted as people. We have not flourished. Not only is that bad for us. It is bad for our fellow citizens: some without the same gifts, who will not take the advantage of what we could give. So it is very important, as it seems to me, for us to get the message over, that this is not elitism. It is a matter of equal opportunity. It is equal opportunity, not just for the white Anglo-Celtic Australian. It is equal opportunity for all Australians. It is not just for the Australians in the metropolis. It is equal opportunity for Australians in all parts of the country. It is not

just for the old community. It is for the newcomers to our country, perhaps children of Turkish migrants, who may not have had an educational tradition in their family, but who have that fluke chance of nature, of gifts, which may maximise their contribution to human society. And above all, it is not just a right of the white Australian community. It is also a right of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The people who were originally here before our forebears came - living here in harmony with nature.

We must dedicate ourselves to the dream of having a just education system. This means fundamentally a just public education system, but also in the Catholic schools and also in the private schools. A just system will extend the opportunity to flourish to those who may otherwise not reach their full potential. It is a big job and a job that has to start very soon. It is a job that has to start essentially in teacher training. And then in the giving of the opportunities in kindergartens. It is not something you can just graft on to the institutions of tertiary education. We must go out there to Wilcannia, to Broome, to Cape York and to the far reaches of our continental country. We must identify the people with gifts and talents. Not just in doing sums. But those with talents in the world of the spirit and in creativity and in music and in literature. It is a human right. It is very important that we should be evangelists for this cause, and unashamed of it. Most of our fellow citizens think it is elitist. The egalitarianism of our society, without a bunyip aristocracy, is a good thing. But we must make the point that this is equal opportunity in education. And we must become evangelists for that cause until our message prevails.

THE NEED FOR RESEARCH - FOUNDATION OF THE DREAM

If I have one closing thought for you, it is that it is not good enough for us to sail by intuition in this area. We must rest our case on research, on empirical studies and on deep examination of the issues. If it will last, our dream will depend upon real intellectual endeavour which studies what happened to those children who went to the Education Department in 1948 and filled in those forms. Was that a good thing? Is it a self-fulfilling prediction? Is it useful to give, as I got, a lot of Gilbert and Sullivan, instead of a lot of hard-nosed mathematics? We must look at the different systems of education. We must research the choices. We must examine the streaming of students and late entry and the whole idea of equal opportunity.

Ours is truly a very worthy cause. Although I am associated with very many groups, all of them worthy, I think this is a cause which is especially important. Because, at stake is nothing less than the future of our country, and the future of its people.

That is why, after a long, gruelling week and despite an early start with an Argentinian taxi driver, I was delighted to come down to Melbourne during your workshop. I feel that we do have a dream. It is a dream to be proud of. But it is a dream we have to sell. We should become evangelists for our dream. That is our challenge.