

The Legitimisation of Australian Education

Gavan Butler

A review of the Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Education and Training, Education, Training and Employment, (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1979), three volumes; total price \$26.15 - Volume 1 \$12.50.

The "Williams Committee" of Inquiry was established late in 1976. At the time, the Prime Minister (Fraser) gave several reasons for the inquiry:

- (a) It is more than a decade since the Martin Committee reported. Following that Report there were major changes in tertiary education - the number of universities was increased from 10 to 19, the new system of colleges of advanced education was established, and the Commonwealth became heavily involved in the extension of technical and further education. But these three sectors have tended to develop in isolation from each other, the boundaries between the sectors have become blurred, and there is a need to clarify the roles of the various institutions.
- (b) There is also a need to consider how post-secondary education as a whole relates to the needs of individuals and to the linkages between education and employment. Unemployment is particularly severe among the young, and it is important to examine whether the education system, and particularly the pattern of post-secondary education, is matching satisfactorily the demands of the labour market. For if an education system fails to provide people with relevant skills it diminishes their chances of achieving satisfying lives.
- (c) There is a danger that as economic growth gathers pace it may be hampered by shortages of skilled workers in particular areas of the economy. Such shortages would inhibit the creation of job opportunities in other areas.
- (d) There has been a growing interest in concepts such as open education, recurrent education and retraining, in the needs of special groups, and in the role of educational qualifications in credentialling or selecting people for jobs. This has produced a vigorous debate about the role and purposes of education in our society.
- (e) 'Because Australia has an advanced industrial economy, and because the aspirations of our people demand it, there is a need for a substantial share of the nation's resources to be devoted to education. Because this share is so large it is vital that resources devoted to education should be used to

Gavan Butler is in the Department of Economics at the University of Sydney.

maximum effect, that unnecessary duplication should be avoided and that integrated forward planning of educational provision be given every encouragement.' A review of possible developments up to the year 2000 would assist the Commonwealth and the States to respond co-operatively.¹

It is possible to read what Fraser said as follows. (i) There needs to be established a clear hierarchy of institutions of tertiary education, implicitly - I suggest - because credentials are becoming ambiguous. (ii) The systems of tertiary education must take some of the blame for the high and increasing rates of unemployment among young people off the shoulders of the government itself. (iii) Technical education in particular must be made more adaptive to modern processes of production and to changes in such processes. (iv) The systems of tertiary education must increase their efficiency, whatever their objectives. In summary, the Committee's responses were to propose a distinct hierarchy of institutions while endorsing "credentialism", to propose substantial developments in technical and further education with complete disregard for the work of people like Braverman on de-skilling and its implications, and to propose a variety of methods by which the costs of tertiary education might be reduced. On the other hand, the Committee did not accept blame for youth unemployment; and it carefully asserts that the development of at least the higher echelons of tertiary institutions should be left to the institutions themselves (in particular, to the chief executives of these institutions).

The Inquiry's terms of reference were to consider and advise on (a) the provision of education facilities and services and (b) the relationship between the educational system and the labour market. Eight particular aspects of the provision of facilities and services and six particular aspects of the relationship between the education system and the labour market were to be considered.

The Committee received some 580 submissions (the present reviewer's rough count) from government agencies, private organisations and individuals. It also commissioned ten studies and attended a number of conferences and seminars. The Committee itself was chaired by the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Sydney and included four other present or immediately past administrators of tertiary education, a union official, a commissioner of the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission and three industrialists (two of them members of the Defence (Industrial) Committee).

It is possible to read the report as a fairly innocuous document. A comparison of the specific terms of reference with the recommendations of the Committee (which the Committee did not itself provide) suggests that there is little novelty in the report. The important implications of the report tend to be hidden.

The Committee was asked to report on the responsibilities of State and Commonwealth authorities in relation to the nature and location of institutions. It recommended that in general there should be a greater devolution of powers to the states, while the co-ordination of universities should remain predominantly a matter for the Commonwealth. (There are, of course, more specific recommendations.) On the matter of "the relationship of the provision to community and individual needs and preferences", the Committee recommends a wide variety of courses, counselling, and community participation at specific points (such as Technical and Further Education (TAFE) programmes for aborigines), while urging that care be taken in costing all proposals for new courses and in the accreditation of courses (external in the case of TAFE institutions and Colleges of Advanced Education or CAEs). The Committee was asked to report on "the accessibility of the provision including re-entry and transferability and the problems

of specific groups". It recommended that TAFE institutions be prepared to expand "pre-employment training" in the event that employers appeared to be taking on fewer apprentices than were thought necessary in the light of projections to be undertaken by the Department of Youth and Community Affairs; that there should be greater scope for the transfer of credits between institutions and a greater predictability of transfer; that there should be a review of TEAS in 1980 and that Commonwealth financial assistance is better than the provision of paid leave by employers for part-time study; that there should be more bridging, remedial and recurrent education courses in TAFE institutions; that girls be encouraged to take maths and science at school, should be better counselled at school and should be taken on as apprentices by government agencies; that greater attention be given to the problems of migrants at school; that more information is needed on the teaching of handicapped children and existing special programmes for such children should be extended; and that the recommendations of the Aboriginal Consultative Group's report on Aboriginal Access to and the use of Technical and Further Education be adopted. In regard to "the provision of recurrent education", the Committee recommended that there should be greater scope within TAFE institutions for the up-grading of the qualifications of tradespersons (especially those who have gained their skills "informally") and, for adults, special programmes in trades that are in heavy demand, including the provision of one year of full-time, formal training at the Commonwealth's expense; that CAEs should in general move towards providing for more external studies; and that universities and CAEs should be given funds for the provision of more non-award courses for graduates. The Committee's response to the matter of "the means of evaluating the quality and efficiency of the system" was to recommend a number of studies, better teaching training (at all levels), and the monitoring of the Australian National University's efficiency reviews.

The Committee was asked to advise on "the role of the educational system in preparing people for work and influencing their choice of occupation". It recommended more emphasis on vocational training in schools, on collaboration between schools and TAFE institutions, and on counselling students in regard to vocational requirements; and it recommended that there should be general discussions between the Department of Employment and Youth Affairs and the Tertiary Education Commission on the extension of TAFE special programmes for the unemployed and that there should be established a Special Centre for Youth Studies to be financed by the Commonwealth. In regard to "the extent of and trends of unemployment and underemployment specially among the young", the Committee recommended merely that research should be sponsored by the Department of Employment and Youth Affairs and that the universities should undertake more research in the fields of applied science and technical change. On the subject of "the interaction between the labour market and rising educational standards of new recruits to the workforce, including the role of educational qualifications in credentialling or selecting people for jobs", the Committee virtually confined its recommendations to advising that credentialism is a fair thing. The Committee recommended, in regard to "the role of the education system in updating professional and employment skills and knowledge and in retraining for different employment", that - inter alia - there might be special arrangements for CAE staff to enrol as part-time research students in universities. Finally the Committee was asked to report on "the manner in which manpower forecasts might be made, their reliability and their application in educational training". The Committee was clearly unenthusiastic about manpower planning but recommended that the T.E.C. continue to attempt to forecast the need for graduates from the expensive faculties, namely medicine, dentistry and veterinary science, and that the Department of Employment and Youth Affairs should undertake some forecasting of movements in the supply of and demand for tradespersons.

Three remarks need to be made about the two foregoing sets of comparisons of terms of reference with recommendations. First, they omit a small number of recommendations which bear only an indirect relation to the terms of reference. Second, some of the first set of recommendations clearly bear on the second set of terms of reference. Third, two of the terms of reference and several important, associated recommendations have been left for separate consideration.

The Committee was asked to advise on "the overall pattern of institutions and courses including their objectives", and on "the magnitude of the provision (of education facilities and services) including the desirable balance between sectors". Now, the Committee can be said to have given such advice, in a manner of speaking; but putting the relevant recommendations together reveals much more than ostensibly was sought by the Fraser government. The Committee has in fact recommended a particular hierarchy of institutions of tertiary education.

The existing universities are at the top of the pile; but some are superior to others. There are five universities in the top echelon, those already to be given special research grants "to build up post-graduate centres". (See R. 5.35). These are the Universities of Sydney, N.S.W., Melbourne, Adelaide and Queensland. Beneath the top five are the bulk of the other universities; including an expanded University of Western Australia into which Murdoch would be merged (but see Sir Charles Court on that matter). The A.N.U. would be somewhat special in undertaking research "on topics of national importance" (R.5.38). In the third echelon are four universities, James Cook, Wollongong, Newcastle and New England, which would provide diploma courses for neighbouring CAEs on a contract basis (as well as existing degree courses). (See R.5.29). "The growth in the number of university students [would] be substantially less than the growth in the other sectors" (R.17.5); and university students should be provided, in the main, with degree courses. The sector below the universities is, of course, that of the CAEs, within which there would be a more substantial growth in the numbers of diploma courses than in the numbers of degree courses (R.17.17). There would be at least two echelons of CAEs, those whose recurrent grants would be determined by the T.E.C. (at least one per state) and which have due "administrative strength and maturity" (R.6.19 and R.6.20), and the rest. "The rest" should consider themselves to be under threat of closure or amalgamation (see R.6.23 and R.6.26, in particular). Apparently all CAEs should look to mutual contracting arrangements with TAFE institutions (R.6.29) and to the establishment of more extensive programmes of external studies. Finally, at the bottom of the pile are the TAFE institutions, the whole of which sector is expected to grow faster, in terms of numbers of students, than is the CAE sector.

Justification of the distinctions between the higher echelons of the hierarchy is scant. Concentration of research in five universities would become more difficult if universities were to specialise by faculty more systematically than they do at present. Of this possibility the Report has nothing to say.² It would require changes in conditions for admission to universities in some states and changes in the provision of TEAS allowances; but these are not matters that can have deterred the Committee from considering the possibility. The distinction between universities and CAEs seems to rest on the fact that a university is established by an act of parliament and on the assertion that in respect of their roles, universities are distinct from CAEs. But little that is said of what universities should be (see the vicinity of p. 150, Volume 1) does not apply equally to CAEs.

The report gives some attention to the need for flexibility of staffing in universities and CAEs; but, not at all surprisingly, it nowhere acknowledges any

role for staff themselves in devising appropriate means of ensuring greater flexibility. University administrators in particular have begun to speak of the difficulty of providing extra staff for departments that are increasingly popular with students and of concomitantly reducing the sizes of "unpopular" departments in a period of reductions in the real value of Federal grants. They have also begun to speak of new procedures for ensuring some turnover of staff to prevent the greater ossification of departments. The report recommends early retirement, secondments (between educational institutions and between them and the CSIRO, public service, industry, etc.), retraining and the preparation of "schemes for redundancy" (see R.5.40 and R.6.38); the details are implicitly to be left to the administrators. It also recommends tighter criteria for the granting of tenure (R.5.20, for example), clearly with a view to enabling universities and CAEs to reduce their proportions of tenured staff. The idea of greater flexibility is fine, in itself; but after considering it together with the implicit centralisation of power in the offices of the chief executives of universities and CAEs, no one but a fool and an amnesiac could fail to see that staff who are even vaguely of radical left will have to be more ready to flex than others.³

The Committee noted five objectives of education and took them as given, because "there was little sign in the submissions of a desire to set new objectives" (p.741). The five objectives are familiar: the development of the mental and affective capacities of individuals; vocational training, socialisation; the promotion of social mobility; and the advancement of learning through scholarship and research. On socialisation, the Committee virtually confined its direct remarks to the following definition: to socialise is "to cultivate the personal values that are required for a good society - honesty, a sense of fair play and willingness to contribute a fair share of effort, respect for others and consideration for the less fortunate - and a basic understanding of the nature of society" (p.741), a parody of the language one might hear at a private school on the annual speech day.

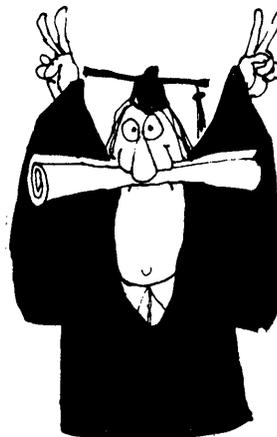
Throughout its Report, the Committee preferred not to comment on the real meaning of education as socialisation.⁴ Education as socialisation is the reproduction of existing social relations - class relations. However, it is certainly not conventional wisdom within educational institutions that an understanding of relations between classes is basic to an "understanding of the nature of society". On the contrary, it is conventional wisdom among Australian teachers to treat Australia as a class-less society. The Committee's definition of socialisation suggests that it views society as a large, closely knit, co-operating family, including some members who are handicapped - "less fortunate". To suggest, as the A.U.S. did in its submission to the Inquiry, that "the education system stratifies the work force and reproduces the social relations of production" is to invite the infinite scorn of the Committee. The Report quotes at length from the very critical A.U.S. submission (see p. 176) but in no subsequent part of the Report does the Committee deign to make a direct reply to the criticism. Even where it might have without giving too much away, as in its discussion of credentialling, it remained painstakingly agnostic. The Committee broadly concluded that "credentialling" by educational institutions is appropriate, after setting aside several pages to rebutting criticisms that credentials do not either necessarily reflect the investment in "human capital" that has occurred or necessarily identify the order of the worth of schooled persons to prospective employers (respectively the "investment and screening effects" of credentialling). Nowhere was there a mention of social stratification. There is not even an acknowledgement of the much milder notion that educational institutions may themselves encourage students to seek credentials for their own sake rather than the learning to which credentials might attest.

The Report does not fail to comment on the socialising effect of education because the Committee was ignorant of it. Inherent in the recommended hierarchy of educational institutions there is precisely the view that education is to reproduce the relations of a society in which there are quite distinct classes. The homely little definition of socialisation quoted earlier is an ideological blind (though not on which the Committee thought it necessary to construct very seriously. Underlying the Committee's overall approach is the belief that an expansion of education is not so much a determinant of economic growth as something which continued growth makes possible. But what growth makes possible must conform with the conditions of growth: that is to say, the expanded education that continued growth makes possible must maintain the social relations upon which this growth is dependent.

The Committee noted four functions of education other than socialisation. It will be recalled that the first two were the development of the mental and affective capacities of individuals and vocational training. The Committee also acknowledged that technologies are changing rapidly, that there are prospectively great changes in the industrial structure of the Australian economy, and that the incidence of part-time employment is rising. (See especially Chapter 13). By and large, however, the Report fails to confront the questions of what "vocations and the development of mental and affective capacities" may mean in a new era.

The Committee virtually endorsed the process of "de-skilling" that is evident in many areas of employment. Traditional skills are being broken down as new technologies in manufacturing and service activities in particular demand job specifications that are increasingly narrow. The breaking-down of traditional skills is recognised and accommodated in the so-called modular method of technical training which the report endorses. However, the Committee failed to consider the implications of de-skilling. In other words, it failed to consider questions such as the greater alienation of workers that is implied by the developing labour processes of the office and the factory and how it may be possible to maintain and retain the skills and capacities that are necessary for the survival of small communities in an age in which the few, all-embracing controllers are vulnerable to extinction. The Committee took the general view that the technical education must be more adaptive and must contribute to ensuring that an insufficient supply of appropriately trained workers never impedes whatever development of Australia's industrial structure is in the interests of large-scale capital.

Considerable attention is given in the report to the selective devolution to the states of responsibility for tertiary education. The recommendations in this regard are probably among those which Professor Williams believes are too subtle for the general reader.⁵ But one implication is clear: they would retain Federal responsibility for the higher echelons of tertiary education, so that as Fraser's "new Federalism" compels the states to take over more of the financing of education, the states would not at the same time increase their interference with education where it really counts.



FOOTNOTES

- 1 As quoted in the report of "The Williams Committee", Volume 1, pp. 1-2.
- 2 Although the Committee does refer to the T.E.C.'s efforts to limit the duplication of faculties, which is not the same thing at all. (See pp. 157-161, Volume 1).
- 3 "If there are any further disruptive activities the universities should now be in a better position to deal with them (than in the earlier seventies before disciplinary procedures were changed)". "Perhaps universities as corporations have been remiss in assuming too easily that all their members understand the conditions of health in universities." (Both quotes from p. 175 of Volume 1.)
- 4 See, for example, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, Schooling in Capitalist America, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976.
- 5 B.R. Williams in The University of Sydney Gazette, Volume 3, May 1979, p.3: "Not all have sufficient background understanding of the issues to pick up the significance of the approach or the recommendations".

2nd WOMEN & LABOUR CONFERENCE

WOMEN IN AUSTRALIA, PAST AND PRESENT –
INCLUDING A SECTION ON WOMEN OVERSEAS
17 - 19 MAY, 1980 - UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

Sponsored by the Society of the Study
of Labour History, History Department,
LaTrobe University, and the School of
Humanities, Deakin University.

*The Melbourne Women
& Labour Conference
Group has monthly meet-
ings. For further details,
ring 489-2824.*

*Themes so far: Work
– Labour Movement –
Feminism – Racism &
Colonialism – Health,
Sexuality and the
Family – Religion –
Education – Culture –
Methodology.*

*4 Bulletins will be
published before May
1980. \$5 subscription.
1st issue March 1979.*

*Send ideas, offers of
papers and Bulletin sub-
scriptions to Women &
Labour Conference,
History Department,
LaTrobe University,
Bundoora, 3083.*

Copyright of Full Text rests with the original copyright owner and, except as permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, copying this copyright material is prohibited without the permission of the owner or its exclusive licensee or agent or by way of a license from Copyright Agency Limited. For information about such licences contact Copyright Agency Limited on (02) 93947600 (ph) or (02) 93947601 (fax)