

Agenda for a national association

W. G. K. Duncan

Professor of History and Politics, University of Adelaide,
Chairman of the Board of Adult Education, University of Adelaide,
Formerly Director of Tutorial Classes, University of Sydney

I was reminded of my schoolboy days when I read the opening words of the first number of the Newsletter, to be issued quarterly by the Australian Association of Adult Education. In our textual study of *Macbeth* (does this sort of thing still go on?), we were asked to say what punctuation mark we thought most appropriate after Lady Macbeth's famous words 'We fail', when trying to screw her husband's courage to 'the sticking place'. A question mark, indicating that the possibility of failing had never occurred to her before? A full stop, suggesting resignation, or fatalism? An exclamation mark—to be accompanied by a scornful tone of voice? Which of these alternatives fitted in best with our conception of Lady Macbeth's character? I plumped for the exclamation mark. (The edition I now have gives a colon—that would have floored us!)

The opening words of the Newsletter were simply “WE ARE!”—and I wondered whether the Editor had used the exclamation mark to indicate surprise, relief, triumphant satisfaction at difficulties overcome, or a sense of exhilaration at future prospects. More than a little of each would have been justified, in view of the issues involved and the unconscionably protracted period of gestation—the duration and difficulties of which would have shamed even an elephant. The need for some sort of nation-wide organization in the field of adult education has been felt, and I thought agreed upon, for over forty years. Is it any wonder that considerable impatience was expressed during the past few years at the inability of the relevant groups, at conference after conference, to agree upon the appropriate form, composition, and functions for such an organization? Now, at long last, it is launched—or born, to keep to our previous metaphor, and it is up to all of us to see that it neither dies from neglect nor is expected to run before it can walk.

It may be salutary to remember that this new Australian Association had a predecessor (in the Federal Council of the W.E.A.) to acknowledge its achievements and to probe for the causes of its eventual failure. Perhaps it was too narrowly based, too restricted in its appeal, or too ‘alien’ ever to become properly assimilated in Australia. Or was it simply that the time wasn’t ‘ripe’—whatever that means? Mr. Hutchinson, in a companion article in this number, reminds us of a similar ‘false start’ (or what I should prefer to call a similar ‘gallant effort’) in the international field. The World Association of Adult Education during the twenty years of its effective existence not only published a very informative Bulletin, but sponsored a number of occasional publications such as the 70-page booklet on *The Present Position of Adult Education in Sweden* prepared by W. H. Marwick in 1938. The prefatory note is worth quoting: ‘Mr. Marwick held a Bursary awarded by the World Association for Adult Education for tutors and organizers engaged in Adult Education to visit a country other than their own’. Quite

a useful precedent for our own Association. Even after the World Association stopped publishing, it remained an extremely useful centre of information. I still remember, with gratitude, the prompt and generous assistance given me by its secretary, Miss Dorothy Jones, when I was preparing a report on adult education for the Commonwealth Government, in 1944.

Likewise, it is worth recalling that one of the first enterprises of our W.E.A. Federal Council was to publish a series of books 'for the use of students in tutorial classes and elsewhere'. They were certainly read and used 'elsewhere'; indeed, several of them came to be recognized as landmarks in their respective fields. The first, a modest paperback of 71 pages which appeared in 1919, was called *Democracy and Freedom: an Essay in Social Logic* by Elton Mayo – then Lecturer in Psychology and Ethics in the University of Queensland, but later to become famous throughout the academic world as Professor of Industrial Research in the Graduate School of Business Administration at Harvard University. This was followed by two contributions from Victoria: *The New Social Order: A Study of Post-War Reconstruction* by Meredith Atkinson (then Director of Tutorial Classes at Melbourne University) and a pioneer *History of Trade Unionism in Australia* by J. T. Sutcliffe.

The Sydney team (Portus and Bland—the latter still happily with us) published *Marx and Modern Thought* in 1921 and *Shadows and Realities of Government* in 1923, both of which attracted favourable attention from such men as A. D. Lindsay at Balliol and H. J. Laski at the London School of Economics. A South Australian contribution also appeared in 1921: *Modern Economic History—with special reference to Australia* by H. Heaton (then Director of Tutorial Classes in Adelaide, and later to become a front-ranking economic historian in America). If I remember aright, this substantial work of nearly 300 pages of close print, first appeared as supplements to the W.E.A. journal *The Australian Highway*, and

was the edited version of lectures which Heaton delivered at Broken Hill—travelling up from Adelaide week by week to do so. These were the days when Broken Hill was, like Milton's London, a ferment of ideas and radical speculation.

Perhaps the most famous of all the W.E.A. series was Number 6, which appeared in 1922, called *A New Province for Law and Order* by Mr. Justice H. B. Higgins. The province of industrial relations may not have proved as amenable to law and order as Higgins hoped it would be, but compulsory arbitration seems likely to remain a lively issue throughout the industrialized world—with Higgins' name and work figuring prominently in the continuing debate.

Thus, within the first five years of its existence, the W.E.A. Series had brought out no less than seven creditable works. Most of them were modest in scale, all of them unimpressive in appearance. But, remembering the limited, non-affluent market for which they catered, and the heavy lecturing and administrative burdens shouldered by their authors, one can appreciate the courage and the 'sense of mission' that must have informed the adult education movement in those days. With bigger staffs nowadays, and a wider, more affluent market—surely here is an immediate challenge to our new-formed Association. Perhaps not 'immediate', in the sense that a similar venture should be given top priority, but at least a 'standing' challenge to us, to be worthy of our predecessors.

Just what are the most urgent problems, demanding the immediate attention of the Association and its executive officers, it would be presumptuous for me, as an outsider, to say. But there are plenty of important tasks with which it could, and I hope eventually will, concern itself. The first that occurs to me is a matter of morale, springing from inner conviction. Granted that the phrase 'a sense of mission' has an old-fashioned ring about it (not quite as bad, perhaps, as the pious 'self-improvement' of the 19th century), how

is it to be replaced by something giving strength and direction, and yes, integrity, to those who work in the field of adult education? Knowledge was sought by the early 'missionaries' for the power it would bring—the power to reform and transform society; a 'liberal' education was thought to be a means of 'liberating' people from the chains of ignorance, prejudice and narrow horizons. Do people think like that now, or respond to that sort of appeal? Do newcomers to the work, even full-time tutors, know anything of its historical background, its purpose or philosophy? Has it one, these days? If so, how is it to be adapted to changing needs, how are newcomers to be initiated, and the 'old brigade' sustained and invigorated?

Well, first of all by the mutual stimulation made possible by organization. Let me cite some examples from personal experience. Within the past few years there has been an appreciable 'lift' in the morale of three groups with which I am connected, brought about largely by more effective organization. The first consists of teachers of political science in Australian universities. We have formed an Australian Political Studies Association, in imitation of a similar body in the United Kingdom, and this, in turn, was the result of a suggestion made by Unesco (which works, wherever possible, through 'learned bodies' rather than scattered individuals). Both the Australian and the U.K. Associations now have well-established journals and regular conferences, and I, for one, can testify that the U.K. conferences are an immense boon to visitors on study leave.

Not only political scientists, but University staffs as a whole throughout Australia, now show more signs of life and vigour than ever before. The main reason for this is, of course, their rapid growth in numbers made possible by the increased Commonwealth grants which resulted from the Murray Committee report. But the various Staff Associations now have a Federal Council, with a voice of its own in its journal *Vestes*. The rapid growth of this journal in size, format and appearance, and range of issues discussed—has been

quite remarkable. Its attention is no longer confined to salary scales and similar bread-and-butter issues (it hasn't forgotten these, of course!), but ranges over such matters of principle and policy as the dismissal of Professor Orr; the failure to appoint Russel Ward; 'failure rates' within Universities; the content of the curriculum; the need for, and problems associated with, the establishment of new universities; and so on. It looks as though University staffs are organizing themselves into a professional body of considerable force and significance.

The third group I have in mind are the librarians—a group, like adult educators, still struggling for recognition as a distinct profession. Each of these groups still has a long way to go in convincing public authorities of all kinds of the importance of its work, that it should be treated as an integral part of the whole educational system, and that the supply of its type of service will very quickly uncover a latent demand for it. But librarians at least have, during the past fifteen years, made a considerable impact on these authorities, and have organized themselves into a nation-wide organization, with the usual journal and regular conferences. Having attended some of these conferences I can vouch for the enthusiasm and sense of purpose which they both exhibit and kindle. I can still remember how chastened I felt, as an ex-adult educator, to return from one such conference of librarians in Sydney in 1959, at which morale was so high, to find the adult educators in Adelaide still wrangling and at cross-purposes about the need for any national association.

But agreement, or at least a substantial measure of it, has at last been reached, and we can now get down to an agenda—jobs to be done. Again I must remind myself that I am a mere 'fellow-traveller' (or, at best, when my subscription is accepted, an 'associate'). So I shall confine myself to broad issues and long-range plans. The national association will no doubt—and quite legitimately—press for increased financial assistance for its own work. But should it not also contribute

ideas, and perhaps specific proposals, concerning educational policy as a whole? What I have in mind is the general point, made so convincingly by Sir Richard Livingstone in his *The Future in Education*, that the problem of schools can never be solved in isolation. No matter how long children are kept at school, he argued, and no matter what is crammed into their course of studies, they can never be equipped with an adequate education. It is only if and when a schoolmaster can take it for granted that his pupils will continue their education after leaving school, in other, and more appropriate, institutions, that he is able to design a curriculum suited to their needs and interests and degree of maturity. This needs saying, and emphasizing, now that so much discussion has been provoked by the Wyndham report on the one hand, and by the Murray Committee's suggestion that we need new types of tertiary education, on the other. Should not adult educators have something to say about part-time education, about junior Colleges, about the range and balance of studies within Institutes of Technology, about the type and purpose of the many new Universities that are likely to be established within the next decade, about People's Colleges and residential adult education generally?

More specifically, isn't it time that the existing Universities (and the Universities Commission) were made aware of the many problems and fields of interest within adult education urgently in need of investigation and research? Could not existing Departments of Education within Universities devote some attention to adult needs and interests in various fields of learning, or Departments of Sociology make surveys of various kinds relevant to adult education? And might not inquiries and requests of this kind do something to break down the wrong-headed opposition within most Australian universities to the development of the social sciences? Outside stimulus is probably needed to persuade Departments of Economics to tackle such dangerous fields as industrial relations, but surely here adult students have a lot to contribute from their

own experience. The need for town planning and the implacable opposition to it from a variety of vested interests—calls for academic study and widespread discussion before legislation, with teeth in it, is attempted or enforced. Likewise in the field of local government, or trade union affairs, or pressure group activities—the very stuff of politics—little is being attempted. Provided the Universities are not asked to solve practical problems, or to fashion policy, but are allowed to confine their efforts to genuine investigation and critical discussion, these are community needs to which they should be responsive, and the formulation of specific projects within these fields might well come—*inter alia*, of course—from adult educators.

Likewise, within the field of training, Universities should be prepared to help, provided they are not asked to provide courses of a technical nature. All sorts of groups in Australia are now trying to acquire status by attaching the prestige of a University degree to their training courses. One of the crudest of such attempts was a recent request for a degree course in ‘timber’—not even forestry! Such requests emphasize the need for institutes of various kinds, at the tertiary level. But there are already a number of post-graduate diploma courses within Universities, and it is perhaps through some such course that the adult educator, like the librarian, will, in future, be initiated into his professional work.

Another field in which fruitful co-operation should be possible between University staffs and adult educators is in devising and presenting such TV programmes as ‘University of the Air’. The content and design of some of these talks, and especially the language used, shows that some of the speakers have no idea how to communicate with ‘lay’ audiences. Their whole approach and focus seems wrong. Eminent scholars of the calibre of R. H. Tawney and G. D. H. Cole had the humility to confess that they had to learn this art when conducting their first tutorial classes, and, in the process, learnt a good deal about their own subject. Except in some abstruse fields

it is not necessary to be superficial to be intelligible. To popularize is not necessarily to vulgarize. It is more a matter, as James Harvey Robinson put it years ago, of 'humanizing' knowledge. And I am more and more being driven to the conclusion that the least humanized of scholars are those who profess the 'humanities' within Universities.

This leads me to express another long-range, perhaps pious, hope. How are the 'two cultures', to which C. P. Snow has drawn attention, to be reconciled—or, at all events, prevented from drifting still farther apart? The most likely suggestion I have seen is that made by Sir Eric Ashby in a chapter on 'Split Personality in Universities' in a recent book on *Technology and the Academics*. He boldly declared that 'specialist studies (whatever they are: metallurgy or dentistry or Norse philology) should be made the core around which are grouped liberal studies which are relevant to these specialist studies. But they must be relevant; the path to culture should be through a man's specialism, not by by-passing it'. But, as he goes on to point out, 'If technology were to become the core of a new twentieth-century humanism (as Greek became the core of a new fifteenth-century humanism), several adaptations would be necessary in British universities'. For 'adaptations' I would be inclined to say 'revolutions'. It would require great courage and imagination on the part of both teachers and administrators.

But it might be attempted, especially if the possibilities of such an approach were revealed in pioneer attempts in a number of different fields. And this is where the adult educators might blaze the trail. They are not tied to an examination syllabus; nothing very serious happens if an experiment of theirs gets bogged down; and, in any case, class members would be able to contribute from their own experience in a way quite impossible with last year's schoolboys. Take the history of technology, for example, which I know has an immediate appeal to engineering students, and on which there are now some excellent books available. But little attempt has been made,

so far, to link such histories of technology with class structure, or the wider economic forces at work, or the prevailing ideas of the time. If this were done I'm sure the engineers would 'take it', and be just as 'humanized' as they would be by conventional courses in history. I know it is much easier to say things like this than to do them (like teaching history 'backwards') but 'split personality' is a danger which threatens our whole community, as well as our universities, and if the split widens, where do we finish up? It is difficult to provide asylums for whole communities.

Short of bridging such a fundamental cleavage in our ways of thought and our picture of the world, there are many other ways in which adult educators can set about closing gaps, if only within their own field of work. Surely greater co-ordination of effort is possible, without in any way jeopardizing their independence or autonomy, between such bodies as the W.E.A., C.W.A., Arts Councils, Agricultural Extension Departments, and evening Colleges as well as Universities and Adult Education Boards. Even wider than this, have such bodies, either separately or in a concerted effort, thrown themselves behind the library movement—first of all to get free public libraries established, then to make full use of their resources (and their premises) and ready whenever necessary to spring to their defence in cases of attempted censorship. Authors, publishers, librarians and adult educators should all feel attacked by any attempt to restrict the free circulation and communication of ideas. Some impressive examples of co-operation between these groups in the U.S.A. might well be emulated in Australia.