The TEC Report is one of those documents one tends to have a bad conscience about. Everyone in universities ought to read it, and hardly anyone actually does. Volume 1 Part 1 I explain the significance of the "parts" shortly is a handsome 300-page volume in royal blue, written for the most part in splendidly indigestible bureaucratic prose. It is a working document, with a good deal of technical detail about standards, auditors, and technical and further education (TAFE). It is also a highly political document, with a good many messages aimed both at the Federal Government and at the institutions of higher and technical education.

The aim of this review is to encourage people to read it for themselves. Since it doesn't make any sense outside its political and bureaucratic context, I thought the most useful thing to do would be to sketch in this background, and then comment on the things the document reveals — not always intentionally — about the current circumstances of higher education. I will concentrate mainly on the universities.

The TEC

Firstly, what is the TEC itself? Universities in Australia were created by deliberate acts of the State, and have always been dependent on State funding for their continued existence. For their first hundred years, however, from the 1850s to the 1950s, they remained largely independent institutions, outside the ambit of State policy in any very substantial sense. They were kept out of the clutches of the Departments of Education (or Public Instruction) when these were set up towards the end of the nineteenth century. One reason for their autonomy was that there were being fairly small institutions, as there was no mass demand for advanced education. Another was that the main services they provided — technical training for the professional intelligentsia and cultural polishing for the sons and daughters of the rich — were in themselves uncontroversial. There did not really have to be any policy about them — they just needed to be provided. It was a bit like the government providing a meteorological bureau, or a wharf.

This changed in the 1940s and 1950s, when higher education became very much a policy question for the State. The reasons for this are complex, and can hardly explore the details now, but they include at least these four key points: (a) an increasing demand from capitalists and technocrats for a skilled, well-trained workforce to sustain the course of urban industrialization on which Australia was then set; (b) a markedly increased demand for higher education and especially for more and better secondary education for their children, leading to a massive demand for trained teachers; (c) an explosion in other semi-professions (such as engineering, social work, etc.); increasing the pressure on training institutions; (d) an overall increase in what has been called "credentialedism", that is a demand from both employers and employees for certificates and diplomas, etc., meaning that labour-market competition was increasingly conducted before entry to work. This resulted in both an inflation of the qualifications required to do existing jobs (lengthening of training courses, substitution of degrees for diplomas, etc.); and the invention of new qualifications for what had previously been uncertificated jobs (social work being a prime example).

As the federal government was increasingly involved both in directing the process of capitalist industrialization (it was, for instance, centrally involved in launching the car manufacturing industry in the 1940s), and in trying to manage the social tensions that resulted from it, there was a logic in its situation that demanded it become involved with higher education. This was not a matter of Bob Menzies' personal benevolence in the cause of public enlightenment. Indeed it was the Labor Government of the 1940s that took the first steps to a federally-funded university system with the establishment of a research university in Canberra, the original ANU. The big jump, nevertheless, came at the end of the 1950s, when the economic expansion was well under way, and the federal government moved in to fund and coordinate further development. The new universities of the 1950s-75, the great era of growth — Macquarie, Newcastle, Wollongong, Griffith, James Cook, Flinders, Waikato, La Trobe, Murdoch — are the products of this new phase of State interest in higher education.

There have been two main steps in the institutional control of the new flow of federal money. The first was the setting-up of a formal Commonwealth agency, the Australian Universities Commission, in 1959. With the growth of the CAEs in the 1960s, and increasing Commonwealth Government interest in technical education and schools, parallel bodies were set up for these sectors (the best known being the Schools Commission, 1973). In the mid-1970s there was a re-organization, with the three post-school sectors being brought together under one umbrella, a super-commission called the Tertiary Education Commission.

This is a statutory authority composed of nine or so members, with a staff nominally of about 100, now cut back in the general trimming, its full-time chairman at the time of the report was Peter Karmel. Three other members are respectively the commissioners for universities, for advanced education, and TAFE. They in turn are chairpersons of three Councils (in our case, the Universities Council), likewise statutory committees of about the same size. They are the successors to the former specialized commissions, and are directly in touch with the institutions in each of the three sectors.

However, for all this apparatus, the T.E.C. does not actually make government policy on higher education. It merely advises the Federal Minister for Education, in its detailed advice on funding, legislation, etc., goes into the bowels of the bureaucracy, its main lines are discussed by Liberal, Socialists, and eventually by Cabinet. Since FiIo is not a strong minister, education policy is particularly ad hoc and dependent on the general pressures of the Government's economic and electoral strategy. What eventually emerges is not necessarily what the T.E.C. wanted — though it now has to administer the result.

As this has got a bit complicated, it may help to illustrate the main lines of communication by a diagram — again, focusing on the universities.

This illustrates the first phase of the business, when the Minister has formally asked for advice (1). The institutions formulate their demands, and shoot them in to the three Councils. Each Council winnows, trims, expostulates and endorses, then puts its submission to the T.E.C. These submissions are published, no doubt in splendidly indigestible bureaucratic prose. The Minister can then consult the authorising legislation and the T.E.C. Report (separate booklets).

The T.E.C. itself winnows, trims, etc., and reflects on the relationship between the three, and then puts its submission in to the Minister. This is published as Vol. 1 Part 1 of the T.E.C. Report in the volume under review. There is also, confusingly, a Vol. 1 Part 5, containing the appendices for Part 1.

The Minister in his wisdom then tells the T.E.C. what he has got, the T.E.C. tells the Councils, the Councils tell the universities, etc., much the same as the diagram, but with the arrows reversed. Volume 2 of the T.E.C. report is the detailed recommendations adjusted after the whole process is complete. It's the basis of the legislation by which Commonwealth money is actually appropriated for the institutions, mainly in the form of grants to the States.

The political/economic context: conservative education strategy

I left off the narrative to get on to the machinery at a crosspoint. The T.E.C. was not set up in 1977 by accident. This change in the administrative apparatus of higher education immediately followed decisive changes in the political and economic circumstances, the most dramatic of which were the first stage of the economic recession. One of the great boons of the Fraser government was not to get into power was raising the salaries of the police; and Reagan's incumbency is boom time for the military in U.S. The crucial point was to reverse the gains made by the working classes of Western countries in the latter stages of the postwar boom, and the accompanying squeeze on profits.

Along with a direct campaign to roll back real wages, or at least halt their growth, has come a conservative campaign to squeeze those parts of the state which provide the "public wage" to the capitalist economy — welfare and education. The object is a general redistribution of income back towards the rich. Party this reflects the direct impact of the Thatcher Government — it is reputedly the wealthiest cabinet in Australian history. Party it reflects the policy idea that to make a capitalist economy work successfully you have to make sure that capitalists in general do well out of it.
It is vital to see education policy in that context. Time and again it has been shown that collectivity sitting on the fence or assuming that a good 'educational-needs' case for expansion, or a plausible case that more cuts would damage an institution, would have to be accepted by the authorities and then being buffeted while it was anything but a -at all. We are up against a powerful tide of political strategy and class interest.

There are, nevertheless, a good many cross-currents. It is dangerous for politicians to take the axe to established institutions. The Fraser Government has been cautious, and it has pruned rather than chopped. The T.E.C. itself, in a sense, is a product of this caution. It would not have been set up if the object was to slash higher education right back. Its brief was to rationalize an area of federal funding that was plainly going to continue at something like existing levels.

It was, nevertheless, wanted to perform somewhat different tasks. One of the first signs of the recession was a growing level of youth unemployment. This fed into a complex change in working-class attitudes to education, which is still working itself out, but which has certainly meant an end to the steadily growing educational demand of the previous three decades.

So far so good, from the point of view of conservative strategy — cuts in provision, and a shift of resources to private schools, could be presented as responses to popular distrust and dissatisfaction with state schools. Some conservatives even, for a couple of years, set up a brisk traffic in arguments blaming youth unemployment on the troubles of the schools (almost exactly the reverse of the truth). But this breakaway of the boom-time nexus between schooling and employment also rapidly undermined the education system's ability to legitimate the inequalities of the labour market. By mediating between the work process and the educational process, the schools had an important role in providing a critique of the capitalist system; and if one set breaks down, another must be built up. This was accompanied by much wise talk of 'economic realities', 'industry liaison', and the like.

Rivaling this in the baldness of its hypocrisy was the reconcentration strategy aimed at schools, shifting resources from state to private sector (in a sense, a private 'sector' for the most part, rather than a 'sector' in education). All schools are public institutions, and have always been the object of state policy; but they do provide for rather different clienteles. What the promotion of 'freedom of choice' in schooling actually means on the ground is more subsidies for the education of the rich and less for the education of the poor. If the authorities are to be rather crude terms, I suggest they find out what is actually going on in schools today.

Given that it was invited to 'advise' a government bent on that kind of policy in education, what did the T.E.C. do?

The Report

In the first place, it did what it had to: produced a concrete, costed version of the programme the Government wanted. It was basically based on the overall stability in funding — total grants of $1,805 m in 1981, $1,677 m in 1984; (b) growth in the TAFE sector, as already noted, (c) reconstruction in the Advanced Education sector, shifting away from teacher training and towards management and technologies. (This involved proposals for amalgamations involving CAEs which used to be teachers' colleges, an idea which has been taken up energetically by the Razor Gang.)

It is obvious that the universities are in a bit of a mess. The most obvious problem is the student squeeze in most situations. The Report offers nothing about the main structural weaknesses of the university sector, as already noted: (c) reconstruction in the university sector, as already noted; (d) reconstruction in the university sector, as already noted; (e) reconstruction in the university sector, as already noted.

On the other matters the Report shows the ambivalences of the Fraser style. Everyone is aware of the substantial increases in the number of women going to matriculate in the schools, and also entering higher education. Given our sexual division of labour, where women are landed with the bulk of child-care, that creates a pressing need for good child-care facilities at the institutions. The TAFE Council (2 women, 7 men) pointed out that the lack of facilities meant unequal opportunity. The Advanced Education Council (1 woman, 8 men) ignored the issue. The T.E.C. (1 woman, 8 men) doubles whether expenditures on child care centres can be regarded as strictly educational ones. The Commission therefore does not propose to recommend capital or recurrent assistance for child care centres. Groups associated with the institutions which are seeking assistance for child care facilities should apply to the Office of Child Care (p. 231).

Or, in plain language, 'get lost!' I suppose there are not many mothers of small children who are trying to become accountants, executives, mining engineers or metallurgists.

On other matters the Report shows the ambivalences of federal policy. The attempt to trim the state, in a vocational (or apparently vocational) direction; the wisdom of the socio-economic 'expansion' strategy aimed at all higher education into vocational education. The drift is rather to turn the universities into industrial training institutes, and to divide and parcel them out into the education of the elites.

The universities are to do in the face of all this is still unsettled. There are forces in the universities that want to run ahead of Liberal policy and embrace capitalist market leaders, but they are frequently outgunned by the T.E.C.'s basic logic. Certainly it decided against preparing State-by-State proposals 'because of the national character of the matters dealt with in this volume' (p. 6). Its thinking runs to 'sectors', for the most part, rather than regions, States, or institutions. So it is de facto involv-

ed in a process of centralising the administrative and financial control of higher education. The study leave issue, where a limit of 7% of staff time has now been successfully imposed on the universities, is an able example.

And in other respects again, it would seem that the T.E.C is pursuing a line antagonistic to the Government's. It does, however, mildly acknowledge that the 'already state' of the last five years or so has actually meant a reduction in available funds and a rundown of plant and quality of work (cf. p. 71). It has met the political pressure for 'accountability' by setting up a programme of 'Evaluation Studies' in what one suspects is about the most useful way the highly tendentious business can be done at all. That is, making them mostly self-help exercises for the institutions. It has refused to be pushed into being a display piece for the Government's new love-affair with conservative migrant funding, funding 'community languages' (so it was required to, but only at $1 m). It recommended increased funding of private sector teachers' colleges. Most interestingly of all, it has almost entirely kept out of the business, which it could have gone into much more heavily, of trying to influence what the universities should teach. It is sceptical about 'manpower planning' (when will they learn that over one-third of the Australian workforce are women?), and is plainly leaving the universities to work out their own salvation on this score.

The Government has no such restraint. Its response to the (then in the form of the Razor Gang cuts in April '81), and then in the formal guidelines to the T.E.C specifying funding for 1982-84 — has been usefully surveyed by Grant Harman in the last issue of Vates. I would agree with his conclusion, except that I do not see this as a 'bubble' attack on liberal education, but a quite blunt one: and a Government policy is not to turn higher education into vocational preparatory. The drift is rather to turn mass education in a vocational (or apparent) direction; and to divide and parcel more sharply from the education of the elites.

What the universities are to do in the face of all this is still unsettled. There are forces in the universities that want to run ahead of Liberal policy and embrace capitalist market leaders, but they are often not what is imagined, as businessmen tend to drive hard bargains), or to prove voracious when something is in the hope that they will soften their hearts. What has gone before should suggest how fertile that hope is. I think we ought to do better.