

The meanings of the clever country*

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For the past couple of years we have been exhorted to become the Clever Country, a term that combines the catchy alliteration of the copywriter with the wish of fulfilment of the political slogan. Clever people don't use clichés.

But I am interested, professionally and personally, in the provenance of the phrase Clever Country, the impulses that lie behind it and the ambitions that are attached to it. As an historian I am aware of a persistent need among settler societies such as this one to create national traditions and construct national identities. The results necessarily are artefacts, projections of desires and perceived priorities onto an attenuated public memory, but they are not arbitrary artefacts. Rather, such formulations result from a meeting of the actual with the imagined, a combination that makes for change and contestation. Thus Australia has been a pastoral paradise, an El Dorado, a social laboratory, a land of boundless resources and unlimited opportunities, a Lucky Country; it has also been a land of contrarities, a convict hell, a dependency of foreign capital and great and powerful friends, a place of levelling mediocrity, a country of philistinism and cultural cringe.

It follows from the contested and reflexive character of such national prognosis that the labels take on a life of their own. You might recall how often and how ineffectively the authors of the terms Lucky Country and Cultural Cringe protested against a popular usage that reversed their original meanings. So it is with the term Clever Country. I am aware that Barry Jones and Donald Horne have both claims to paternity. Horne sired the earlier progeny, the Lucky Country, and then sponsored the National Ideas Summit in February 1990 where the more cerebral sibling was christened. Jones floated the idea of the Intelligent Country, shortened to Clever for the purposes of the 1990 Federal Election on the dubious grounds that it was shorter and easier to spell.¹

Why not the Smart Country, I wonder, though I appreciate that there are fine shades of difference between the three adjectives; they move from the first, with its connotations of the undesirable egghead to the rather too prescient operator at the monosyllabic end of the spectrum. A Clever Country is safely in the middle. In the hands of the Prime Minister and the Minister for Employment, Education and Training, its critical edge is blunted. It becomes a synonym for entrepreneurial innovation and the harnessing of intellectual creativity for purposes of economic reconstruction.¹

There is an implicit assumption, also, in the proposition that Australia needs to become a Clever Country. It suggests that we need to mend our ways, to make good the mistakes of the past. Much of what I want to say is not about the impediments to Australia becoming a Clever Country but rather concerns the need to recognise a valuable kernel in our past, to nurture it and adapt it to changed circumstances and future needs.

Let me begin with an earlier trope. For much of the last century and part of this one, Australians liked to think of themselves as the coming nation, the redeemers of their European legacy who were able to realise the potential of that parent civilisation because they had escaped its constraints and were accordingly freer, more equal, less cynical, better able to invent the future. These earnest colonists measured their progress with assiduity and ingenuity - Australian statisticians earned an international reputation in the second half of the last century, and the Victorian statistician W H Archer supplemented the official *Statistical Register* with a popular periodical, *Facts and Figures*, published in the 1850s for a general readership.

Progress, as Archer and his colleagues understood it, had a moral as well as a material meaning. They recorded the influx of investment and immigrants, and the export of primary commodities that were the engines of growth; they measured the increase in population and production, towns and railways, wages and bank deposits, that confirmed the high level of prosperity; and they also measured the indices of social progress that this prosperity made possible - the increased rates of family formation and religious observance, the spread of improving leisure pursuits, the growing provision of libraries, museums, galleries and schools. In all these respects there was, indeed, much to celebrate: a striking economic growth rate; high per capita income, higher and more equally distributed than in Europe; remarkably advanced amenities of life.

Public provision was an early feature of this remarkable success story. In the late nineteenth century the colonial governments of Australia expended a quarter as much again per head of population as the British government spent, twice as much as the French government, three times as much as Germany. Much of this expenditure went on the creation of economic infrastructure, but public outlays on what economists call human capital, that is on health, housing and education, was three times as great per head of population in Australia as in the United Kingdom.² In the year 1852, when the population of Victoria had just passed 100,000, the government put aside 20,000 pounds out of a total expenditure of less than 1 million pounds, to build a University, and in the following year allocated 10,000 pounds to erect a Library.

But the great undertaking was the provision of education for every Australian child. This was an arduous project that began well before the passage in 1872 of the celebrated Victoria Education Act, enshrining the principles "secular, compulsory and free", and the struggle to realise those principles lasted much longer. But before the end of the century the state school was a familiar feature of the suburban and bush landscape, and the education departments of the six colonies had taken on the character of prototypical bureaucratic structures, centralised, hierarchical, drilling their charges in a common curriculum.

Recent historians of education have painted an unflattering picture of what went on in these classrooms. They describe hard-pressed, barely qualified teachers drumming the rudiments of literacy and numeracy into their uncomprehending, unwilling

victims by the methods of recitation and repetition. The emphasis in much of this literature is on the irrelevance of the curriculum and pedagogy to the circumstances and needs of the pupils. It is certainly true that the nineteenth-century state school provided little specific training for paid employment, but it needs to be remembered that most skills used in the workforce at that time were acquired on the job. Whether the school-leaver at the age of 13 or 14 became a carpenter or a clerk, a farmer or a shop assistant, an elementary education provided a platform for the acquisition of the specific knowledge and expertise that was acquired by the novice through formal or informal apprenticeship.

There was a broadening of the curriculum from the turn of the century to embrace the teaching of literature, science, history, art and music; and there was a greater emphasis on comprehension and creativity. There was a gradual extension of provision beyond elementary education, and a move into technical and commercial education. But the educational reformers had to contend with stiff resistance from parents, employers and even teachers whose conception of education was nasty, brutish and as short as possible. Here is a newspaper correspondent in the early years of the present century: "If a lot of this nonsense were done away with, and plain common-sense reading, writing and arithmetic taught, there would not be so many dunces. Yours & c., DISGUSTED PARENT".³

For every individual who recalled his or her school days as a time of discovery and enlightenment, there was at least another who remembered the drudgery and humiliation, and carried away a lifelong aversion to study. Some of you might recall the popular radio serial, 'Yes What', in which a group of fledgling dunces and smart-alecs reduced an ineffectual teacher to violent despair. The foundations for that image of the classroom were laid at this time.

But for all its shortcomings, I believe we should not underestimate the importance of this educational culture. However imperfectly, it embodied important principles. At its most basic, it was an institutional response to the challenge of manhood suffrage, adopted by the Australian colonies in the aftermath of self-government in the 1850s. In the caustic formulation of the Englishman Robert Lowe, who had observed the process first-hand while in New South Wales: "I believe it is absolutely necessary that you should prevail on our future masters to learn their letters".⁴ More significantly, the state school was meant to join children together in a common culture (this objective failed, of course, because of the determination of the religious denominations to maintain their own schools) and to train them as fully competent individuals in their public and private lives. And finally, the educational system provided some recognition of the fact that in Australia a fixed social hierarchy had yielded to a different form of stratification, one that allowed for a degree of social mobility and a measure of parity of esteem. A gifted boy or girl in the late nineteenth century might rise as a pupil teacher out of the ranks of the manual working class. A gifted student in the early twentieth century might secure a scholarship to secondary school or even to university.

In doing so they served both their own and the national interest, for, as the Inspector-General of Education in Queensland put it in 1912, "The State would reap the benefit that would follow from the unearthing, rearing and developing into full flower and fruit the latent seeds of genius which would otherwise perish unfulfilled or be born to blush unseen in poverty and insecurity".⁵

The education profession itself constituted a ladder of opportunity for such mobility. I was recently sitting at a table with Jack Caldwell, the distinguished professor of demography at the ANU. He told me that he represented the third generation of his family to work as a teacher. His grandfather had been a primary school

teacher, his father a secondary teacher and he in turn taught at a university. That progression reflects the incremental expansion of public educational provision, from primary to secondary to tertiary, a theme to which I shall return.

Up to the second half of this century, only a minority completed more than a couple of years of secondary education. A tiny minority reached university - by the 1930s the six Australian universities together taught only 10,000 undergraduates. The original universities were hybrids, state-funded public institutions that mimicked the religious foundations of Oxbridge in their Arcadian settings and yet precluded ordained members of the church from the professoriate (and in the case of Melbourne actually forbade them from lecturing outside the University on religious subjects). While the first of them, Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide, seemed to follow the classical model, they quickly took on a vocational emphasis with the addition of faculties of law, medicine, engineering, commerce and so on.

In his history of the University of Melbourne, Geoffrey Blainey describes the reforms of the 1880s that opened up this emphasis as signalling a 'Triumph of the Utilitarians', yet it was a strange kind of utilitarianism that triumphed.⁶ The Australian universities never played the creative role in the civic life of the country, as had the Scottish universities for example; nor were they places that pushed forward the frontiers of useful knowledge, as did the German universities. Rather, they inducted undergraduates into the received bodies of knowledge that equipped them for practice in the professions, albeit with a patina of general education. With honourable exceptions, the universities were not places of innovation or intellectual ferment.

When the new Vice-Chancellor of the University of Adelaide, an English scientist, suggested a course of lectures open to students of the various faculties on the history of civilisation, the response of his Chancellor, the Chief Justice, was not encouraging. "We don't want any fuss", he warned.⁷

But here again we should beware of a historical judgement. Up into the twentieth century the cleverness that Australians displayed in their material life did not derive from the academy. The technical advances that allowed the development of the pastoral industry - from the breeding of the Merino cross to the adoption of the shearing machine - occurred within the industry. In wheat growing the stripper, the stump-jump plough and the combine harvester were all invented by self-taught men. It was not until the turn of the century that trained scientists showed the possibilities of wheat breeding and soil analysis, and even these advances occurred for the most part in separate agricultural colleges. Much the same is true of Australian innovations in mining and mineral extraction. And these were the great export industries where the competitive nature of the world market encouraged innovation. Within the domestic market there was not the same scale of operations or opportunity for expansion, and imported technology sufficed for our manufacturers. The same priorities continued in the inter-war years when the Commonwealth established the first national research body, the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research.⁸

Our cleverness, our creative energy, was directed instead into public life as we invented practices and institutions that could meet the aspirations of an uprooted, restless, immigrant society impatient for self-fulfilment. We pioneered manhood suffrage and later adult suffrage. We were the first to introduce the secret ballot (still known as the Australian ballot in the USA). We devised a method of industrial arbitration for mediating the great conflict between capital and labour; and a further device, the new protection, for underwriting the living standards of the male breadwin-

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ner. We took the public corporation as a method of operating utilities, and applied it successfully to the provision of transport water, gas and electricity. All of these forms of organisation presupposed a certain level of literacy, attained by few other industrial countries at the time, and a shared civic culture.

My purpose in this retrospect has been to remind you of the past that has shaped the present, and to challenge some of the current assumptions about the relationship between education and national life. I am suggesting that the public and universal characteristics of our educational traditions are not synonymous with the meretricious and the Philistine; that something good and worthwhile was achieved in the state school classroom; and that the emphases of our national life were not wholly misaligned with national needs.

What are the present-day obstacles to Australia becoming a Clever Country? Let me suggest an answer by way of a parable. My wife teaches in a Department of Sociology and Anthropology in a university in this city, and last year she was at a graduation ceremony where a number of her students received their degrees. Among them was a student who had struggled. My wife congratulated her and shared in her pleasure that she had been able to find employment as a trainee in the Commonwealth Department of Industry. "And you know what the best thing is?" concluded the radiant student. "I'll never have to read another book."

It's an alarming incident because it strikes at our belief that teacher and student are joined in a mutual concern for intellectual values. If it is unrealistic to expect a graduate to keep up with the disciplinary literature, we at least hope that they might take away some abiding memory of the works of scholarship that have illuminated their studies over three or more years.

What does this tell us about the obstacles to the realisation of a Clever Country? Some would argue that it should be attributed to excessive expansion of the university system and widening of access to include those who are not suited to an academic mode of higher education. You will recall that two of the objectives of the Commonwealth's education policy are increased participation and widened access; to secure these goals the old binary division has been abandoned while there has been substantial expansion of the new unified system. So far the educational standards debate has concentrated on secondary education, which in this State has undergone a simultaneous increase in participation and an analogous unification of the curriculum. There is already some evidence to suggest that the standards debate will spread into the tertiary sector.

The whole weight of our past experience suggests increased participation in the future. One hundred years ago primary education was compulsory and secondary education the preserve of an advantaged minority. Then secondary education became universal but completion and progress to post-secondary education was confined to the minority. Now most complete secondary education and we have half a million students in the tertiary system. While the proliferation of specialised training and the growing importance of credentials will sustain the momentum, it is in any case consistent with the principles of universality that I identified as a powerful and valuable characteristic of the national tradition. So here we might say that the prospects of a Clever Country are in distant sight.

Alternatively, it might be argued that the student's aversion to books indicates a failure of her teachers to teach well and engage her interests. A further concern of the Commonwealth White Paper on Higher Education was efficiency and effectiveness. We are still wrestling over the methods that the university is to use to

appraise academic performance. I can't speak of my wife but I know that she is a good and conscientious teacher who struggles with the sorts of pressures that bedevil those currently employed in higher education. Her teaching load has increased. The level and quality of the support services available to her have diminished. A keen researcher at a time when academics are urged to engage in research, she finds that the funds that were once available within her institution have been diverted to the ARC and that its funding guidelines are inappropriate to her needs. Here I would say that the strategy for making Australia a Clever Country is mistaken.

A further explanation for the graduating student's declaration might be that she has achieved her object of employment and thus has no further use for study. Yet another concern for the White Paper was to make universities more responsive to national objectives and priorities. The mechanism of responsiveness was to be provided partly by the government and partly by the market, but the paramount concern was to match education more closely to the needs of a more competitive and internationally oriented economy. To facilitate this objective as well as to meet the cost of increased provision and participation, the government introduced the Higher Education Charge and encouraged greater commercialisation of higher education.

It is here, I believe that the strategy for making Australia the Clever Country is radically misconceived. The commodification of higher education, and the turn to market signals to make universities more responsive to economic needs, confuses (as do other arms of the government's economic strategy) profitability with productivity. The fact that lawyers, doctors or accountants command high incomes has more to do with an elaborate regimen of professional regulation and self regulation than it has to do with an open labour market, and the prospects of economic recovery will hardly be enhanced by expanding the supply of such graduates. As for the underlying economic theory that informs this view of education, I am in agreement with the arguments presented by Simon Marginson in recent publications.⁹ The belief that education is simply a branch of the economy concerned with the production of human capital is a belief of heroic proportions.

The consequences are apparent in the student's fateful statement that she will never have to read another book. Her attitude to her studies follows the cues given by this model of education. As a consumer she has confused her right to receive an education with her misconceived belief that she was purchasing a credential. She believed it was in her interests to obtain the credential by satisfying the assessment requirements and accordingly regarded extracurricular interests then or now as wasteful of her time and resources. Yet everything we know about economic performance in the global economy suggests that this is a dangerously short-sighted attitude. The specific knowledge and specific skills she has acquired in her studies will have but a limited life. She will need to revise and renew them if she is to enjoy a successful career, and to do so she will need an intellectual capacity that is unlikely to survive her self-denying ordinance. In short, narrow educational instrumentalism is inimical to a Clever Country.

It is noteworthy also that whereas previously our native capacity for invention and creativity was located outside the academy, it is now expected to come from inside the institutions of higher education. That development reflects a long-term change within the universities that gathered pace with their rapid growth in the 1950s and 1960s to augment their research capacity, and a parallel alteration of intellectual practices that reflects the vastly greater scale and complexity of fields of knowledge. The government's increasing control of the national research effort is in part a necessary consequence of resource constraints, in part a response

to the incapacity of Australian enterprises within a globalised economy to maintain an effective research programme.

The results are to be seen in the national priorities applied to ARC funding, in the research centres that proliferate across every campus, in the growing emphasis of universities on marketing agencies, outside contracts and joint initiatives. Symbiotically, universities are themselves adopting the managerial techniques and resource allocation models of the corporate sector, developments that threaten the ability of the university to maintain its coherence and nurture open-ended basic research. There is a danger in this replication of the interests and procedures of private and public sector clients that universities will become little more than analogues of the organisations they serve. What is a university if it is not something more than an ensemble of devolved vocational and entrepreneurial activities?

There is one more way in which I believe that the narrowing of education does a disservice to the Clever Country. Clever people do more than work and earn and consume and invest. They are necessarily more than self-acting acquisitive individuals because in a wide range of personal, social and public dealings they are called on to make judgements and choices. As spouses, parents, friends, associates, colleagues and citizens we have to negotiate complex choices in order to balance our rights and responsibilities. To do so successfully calls for an ethical competence that in turn requires a broader and more generous education than is provided by narrow vocational training.¹⁰ It calls for a renewal of the values that informed, however imperfectly, those who set out to establish a public educational system in the last century.

In summary, I believe that we stand in an analogous position to that of our predecessors a century earlier. They too had expanded the reach of education, only to find that narrow utilitarianism fell far short of their social aspirations. They responded by broadening the curriculum to express a more generous conception of self development, by strengthening the civic culture and augmenting its democratic potential. The task before us is to undertake a comparable enrichment in very different circumstances - a changed world economy, a different labour market, a far more diverse society and an intellectual culture in which we can no longer assume the canonical basis of the humanities. Our task is to discover educational practices that will promote an alert and self-critical awareness.

I draw comfort here from the recent findings of the Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training in its report on *Priorities for Reform in Higher Education*. The members of that Committee quoted with approval from a submission by Don Anderson:

*the undergraduate curriculum, particularly in economics and in the science-based professions, is deficient in that it is producing highly trained, highly competent technicians who are undereducated in the conventional sense of that word. They are not familiar with the society in which they are going to practise - not familiar in any disciplined sense. They do not have good critical capacities and they are not good communicators.*¹¹

The Committee warned that "Australia is producing highly trained technicians who are undereducated in the broader sense of the term".¹²

A primary task over the next few years is to make good this deficiency. We shall do so in difficult circumstances. Yet until we have done so, we shall not be a Clever Country.

References

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- 10 This issue is discussed by Ian Hunter, 'Accounting for the Humanities', *Meanjin*, 3/1989, pp 438-448.
- 11 Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training (1990), *Priorities for Reform in Higher Education*, Canberra: AGPS, June, p 1.
- 12 Ibid, p xiii.