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 copywriters with the wish of fulfillment of the political slogan. Perhaps people don't quite understand.

But I am interested, professionally and personally, in the prev-

ence 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 possibilities, and not necessarily, I would argue, that

they are not arbitrary artefacts. Rather, such formulations result from a

meeting of the exigent, the pragmatic, and the imaginative that enable

for change and contestation. Thus Australia has been a pasturage

paradise, an El Dorado, a social laboratory, is land of boundless

resources and unlimited opportunities, a Lucky Country; it has

also been a land of contradictions, a convict hell, a dependency of

foreign capital in large and powerful friends, a place of levelling

mediocrity, a country of philistinism and cultural cringe.

It follows from the context and reflective character of such

national prophecies that the labels take on a life of their own. You

might recall how often and how unconvincingly the authors of the

terms Light Horse and Golden Circle constructed a narrative against

a popular usage that reversed their original meanings. So it is with

the term Clever Country. I am aware that every Jones and Jumble

have both claims to patriotism. Home-sired the earlier pogroms,

the Lucky Country, and then sponsored the National

Ideas Summit in February 1990 where the more cerebral jibe

was christened. Jones floated the idea of the Intelligent Country,

stressing the importance of science and technology. Jumble

reverted to the dubious grounds that it was shorter and easier to spell.

Why not the Smart Country, I wonder, though I appreciate that

there are some shades of difference between the three adjectives;

they move from the first, with its connotations of the oversimplified

egalitarianism of the John Logie Baird generation, to the middle

stage where the Federal government, three times as much as Germany. Much of this

expatriation went on the creation of economic infrastructure, but

public policy 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. In the

1990s, when the emphasis was on primary education, the Federal

government, per capita, was almost three times that of the

university end of the spectrum. A Clever Country is safely in the

middle. In the


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Page 35 Australian Universities' Review

victims by the methods of recalcitrant competition. The emphasis

in much of this literature is on the prevalence of the curriculum. This hypothesis reflects the extreme degree of
greed for 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 school. A tiny minority received education - by the 1930s the six Australian

universities together taught only 10,000 undergraduates. The

original universities were both small institutions that

institutions that remained the religious foundations of Ozbridge in their

churches and universities and yet they were the church from the

precursors (and in the case of Melbourne actually founded them from lecturing outside the University so

religious matters remained uppermost in their minds and in

Adelaide, seemed to follow the classical model, they quickly
took shape as separate institutions, separate of faculties of law,

medicine, engineering, commerce and so on.

In his history of the Melbourne, Geoffrey Blainey describes the

refusal of the 1880s that opened up this emphasis on universities as the "New University", yet it was a strange

kind of utilization that the "old university" which

never played the creative role in the civic life of the country, as had the

Scottish universities that pushed forward the frontiers of useful knowledge, as did the

German universities. Rather, they incubated undergraduates into

the received bodies of knowledge that equipped them for practice in

the professions, albeit with a patronage of general education. With

honorable exceptions, the universities were not places of innova-
tion 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 wider community based on the history of civilization, the response of

his Chancellor, the Governor, was not encouraging. "We

don't want any fuss," he warned.

But here again we should beware of a historical judgement. Up

to the twentieth century the cleverness that Australia dis-

sipated was not the material life that did not derive from the academy.

The technical advances that allowed the development of the pastoral

system, the development of the technological infrastructure of the

shearing machine - occurred within the industry. In wheat,

waving the strippers, the stumpy-jump plugh and the combine

harvesters were all invented by self-taught men. It was not until the

second half of the century that trained engineers could bring the

possibilities of wheat breeding and soil analysis, and even these advances

took time. When the technological revolution unfolded in the

twenty-first century that trained engineers could bring the

possibilities of wheat breeding and soil analysis, and even these advances

took time. When the technological revolution unfolded in the

university, the domestic market was not the same scale of

having said, that Australia had not been a technical society, technology

sufficed for our manufacturers. The same priorities continued in the

inter-war period, and that period established the first national

research body, the Council for Scientific and Industrial

Research.

Our cleverness, our creative energy, was directed into

public life as we invested practices and institutions that could meet the demands that had been imposed on us for

self-sufficiency. We pioneered manhood suffrage and adult

labor suffrage. We were the first to introduce the secret ballot

(since known as the Australian ballot in the USA). We devised

a method of industrial arbitration for mediating the great

conflict between capital and labor and separate agreements, the new

situation, for understanding the living standards of the male breadwin-
The we. We took the public corporation as a method of operating utilities, and were successful in the provision of transport, water, gas and electricity. All of these forms of organisation promoted some level of efficiency and profitability. However, there were few other industrial countries at the time, and a shared civic culture.

My purpose in this respect has been to remind you of the point that has shaped the present, and to challenge some of the current assumptions about the nature of education, and the role of the State and private enterprise.

I am suggesting that the public and universal characteristics of our educational traditions are not synonymous with the presence of, and the philosophy of, the State and private enterprise. While I was in the state school system; and that the emphasis of our national life were not wholly neglected by 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 lectured in a Department of Sociology and Anthropology in a university. There was 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 her in her pleasure that she had been able to find employment as a trainee in the Commonwealth Department of Industry. "And what do you think the best thing is?" I asked the 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 commitment for intellectual values. It is to some extent 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 field of study. They have a sense of looking forward to an open market for knowledge, and the prospects of economic recovery will be much more likely to be successfully reached at that by the education system. As for the underlying economic theory that informs this view of education, I am in agreement with the arguments presented by such economists as Margaret Stigler in recent publications. 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 fact-stated view of education. As a consumer she has confined her right to an education with her individual need for continuing education. She believed it was in her interests to obtain the credentials of the assessment requirements and according to the specific skills she has acquired. She will read them if she is to receive a successful career, and to do so she will need in intellectual capacity that is unlikely to be transferable to any other educational or educational institution in its own traditional disciplines.

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 activities and the alienation of intellectual practices that reflects the vastly greater scale and complexity of fields of knowledge. The government's increasing concern with the national interest and research effort is in part a necessary consequence of resource constraints, in part a response to the incapacity of Australian enterprises within a globalised economic system.

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 emphases on marketing strategies, spin-off enterprises, and joint initiatives. Sympathetically universities are themselves adopting the managerial techniques and research funding models of the corporate sector, development and market. Thus the ability of the universities to maintain their coherence and public sector clients that universities will become little more than the amalgamation of the organisations that serve them. It is a service if it is not more than an assembly of dispersed vocational and entrepreneurial activities.

There is one more thing I believe. That the narrowing of education does a disservice to the Clever Country. Clever people do more work and earn and consume and invest. They are necessarily more than self-selecting affluent individuals because in a wide range of personal, racial and social publics they are called upon to take a greater share of the country's economic and social needs. As spouses, parents, friends, associates, colleagues and critics 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. 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 in which our forefathers were at the turn of the century. To make the broadest use of the resources of education, only to find that narrow utilitarianism fell far short of their aspirations. They responded by abandoning 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 every 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 new educational practices that will promote an acute and self-critical awareness.

I draw comfort here from the recent findings of the Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training (1996), 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 technicians who are underdeveloped in the intellectual sense of that word. They are not familiar with the society in which they live or how they are expected to function in that society. They do not have good critical capacities and they are not good communicators.

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