

## **The College and the National Policy Debate – The 1970 Survey of School Needs**

Robin Ryan

The founders of the Australian College of Educators (ACE) intended that the College should become an influential source of advice to governments on education policy. Driving force among the founders, Dr James Darling, had written to then Prime Minister Robert Menzies in July 1959 advising him of the body's establishment, 'in the hope that he might find some use for us'.<sup>1</sup> Despite the reputations in the community of the founding and early ACE members, their links to the establishment through prestige schools, and the dominance of Liberal governments, little was achieved. Looking back from 1982, Darling noted his hope that:

*A body of this sort might be regarded as a mouthpiece for education and be called upon, particularly by the Federal Government, for advice...I cannot understand why this hasn't happened.*<sup>2</sup>

Darling's disappointment was shared by a strong response in a survey of members' views in 1980: members 'overwhelmingly [wished] to play a more public role...'.<sup>3</sup> Members seemed to think that the College needed to be more assertive in its public persona, so there is some interest in one of the relatively few occasions on which the College sought to insert itself in a public debate between governments. This occurred in 1969–71 when the states attempted to pressure the Commonwealth for increased federal funding through the mechanism of a National Survey of Needs in Education.

### **A reluctant partner**

The Commonwealth had always been a reluctant player in education other than at university level, especially during the long period of Liberal–National coalition governments. Robert Menzies, as Opposition Leader in 1945, had been much more enthused about a Commonwealth role, moving a resolution arguing that:

- (a) a revised and extended education system is of prime importance in post-war reconstruction
- (b) in particular, attention needs to be directed to increased facilities for secondary, rural, technical and university training.<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly, Menzies then had no doubt about the constitutionality of federal intervention, either under the Section 81, Appropriations power, or the Section 96, Grants to States power. By 1958, however, he was pouring scorn on a similar motion from the Labor side, insisting on an impenetrable constitutional barrier: '...we are dealing with a problem in which the Commonwealth does not have power over, or responsibility for education in the States or by the States'.<sup>5</sup>

The Menzies government was drawn reluctantly in to various forms of federal aid to schools during the 1960s, as pressure mounted especially from private schools facing ever-increasing costs. When promises of aid for science laboratories and scholarships reaped an impressive reward at the 1963 election, the path was set for an ever-expanding but never enthusiastic Commonwealth role.<sup>6</sup>

### **The survey of educational needs**

While much of the pressure which had caused the government's change of heart emerged from supporters of private education and from the tertiary sector, State Ministers through the Australian Education Council (AEC) had also been active. At

the AEC March meeting in 1969 Ministers agreed that each State would contribute to a survey of educational needs for all levels of school education, including teacher preparation, for the period 1971–75. According to the College's account of the survey, the Commonwealth Minister (Hon. Malcolm Fraser) gave 'full encouragement' and ensured that ACT and Northern Territory schools were included.<sup>7</sup> Minister Fraser in his statement to the House of Representatives seemed less impressed with the States' endeavours, indicating that he had had to insist on the inclusion both of the Territory schools and also of non-government schools, after the States had not heeded his request for information on the latter.<sup>8</sup>

Each State provided copies of its submission to the College. These were substantial documents, in some cases amounting to more than 40 pages of printed material, mostly financial tables. The New South Wales Department of Technical Education, then the only independent vocational education agency, contributed a separate substantial submission. This was notable for the need the department felt to instruct its political and bureaucratic readership on the nature of technical education, which it argued should be 'an integral part of the nation's planning'.<sup>9</sup> The submission highlighted the growing range of occupations which existed in the gap between university-provided professional education and those for which a school background sufficed. It argued:

*The widening of that gap is of the greatest significance and the trend is accentuated by technological change which is always accompanied by social change and particularly by change in the organization of work.*<sup>10</sup>

All States provided information under the headings specified in the Council's terms of reference:

- administration and services
- professional and ancillary staff
- buildings and furnishing
- site acquisition
- equipment and supplies
- pre- and in- service education
- scholarships, textbooks
- transport.

According to the College's review of submissions, at May 1970 it was estimated that a gap of \$1.4 billion existed between the States' needs and the revenue available. The gap estimated by the federal department for non-government schools was \$268 million, and for the Territories \$121 million. This total of almost \$1.8 billion would represent around \$17 billion in current dollars.<sup>11</sup>

Not surprisingly, this impressive sum received a cool although ambiguous reception in Canberra. Minister Fraser replied to the States' initiatives in a Ministerial Statement in October 1971,<sup>12</sup> employing the two standard responses of distraction and questioning the proponent's methodology. The first was effected through a lengthy summary of steps taken by the Commonwealth to strengthen the States' general financial positions, support their borrowing programs, and provide specific assistance to educational activities. While educational funding was still at this stage largely capital in nature, the Minister's statement revealed that the federal input had by then risen to 35 per cent of all government capital expenditure on education, compared to only 18 per cent a decade previously.

Additionally, he insisted that the States had been unable fully to spend the Commonwealth's earlier largesse. Finally, he pointed to different methodological assumptions among the States, especially in their implicit student-teacher ratios, noting the variety of research opinions on the value of small student-teacher ratios and arguing for further research.

### **The College response**

The College examined the Minister's propositions in its review of the debate.<sup>13</sup> Noting that the expenditure audited for 1971 in most States reached or exceeded the survey's estimates for the year, the College argued:

*It appears undeniable that if education is to take the course which parents, teachers and administrators agree is desirable, then the necessary expenditure will be beyond the resources of State governments.*

However, the College document supported one of the Minister's grievances: that much educational expenditure was taken up by teacher salaries, observing that the survey had envisaged a salary adjustment of 5 per cent for 1971, while the figure which eventuated was 15 per cent. On the ability of states to expend their funds, however, the College, no doubt reflecting state input, insisted that the problem was excessive federal restrictions and the lack of multi-year planning.

### **The purposes of education**

One interesting sidelight of the debate on the survey was that it induced reflection on the purposes of education, both from the Commonwealth Minister and the College. Minister Fraser's thoughts on the nature of education were spread throughout the Ministerial Statement, but together they amounted to an interesting insight into government thinking. Some excerpts from a discursive commentary follow:

- Tomorrow's tasks will require higher skills and better management than in the past. If we cannot match the large nations in capital and invention, we can at least be our own managers
- National skills and expertise could be crucial in meeting some future challenge and so too a boy's or girl's early training would influence his or her whole future capacity to meet changing circumstances and to participate in emerging technology
- Through education we can do much to reduce inequality
- Perhaps of even more importance than equipping students to meet future technological change is the need to enable man to live with man... a community composed of men and women for whom human values are more important than material advantage... a community in which tolerance and understanding reign and prejudice is abandoned.<sup>14</sup>

The College also sought to set out its ideas of the purposes of schools; although equally high-minded, they tended perhaps towards the more practical:

- To acquire the greatest possible understanding of himself and an appreciation of his worth as a member of society
- To acquire understanding and appreciation of persons belonging to social, cultural, and ethnic groups different from his own
- To acquire understanding and appreciation of his cultural heritage and that of other people
- To acquire to the fullest extent possible for him mastery of the basic skills in the use of words and numbers
- To acquire a positive attitude towards the learning process
- To acquire the habits and attitudes associated with responsible citizenship

- To acquire good health habits and an understanding of the conditions necessary for the maintenance of physical and emotional well-being
- To have opportunity and encouragement to be creative in as wide a variety of fields as practicable
- To give equal opportunity to each child
- To understand and appreciate human achievement and failure in the past
- To prepare for a world of rapid change and unforeseeable demands in which continuing education throughout his adult life should be a normal expectation.<sup>15</sup>

It seems both the Minister and the College were thinking of education in considerably less instrumental and narrow terms than those which have dominated debate in subsequent decades, the Minister perhaps scoring more highly on succinctness and inclusive language. It is not clear that the College ever formally endorsed the proposed set of purposes.

### **The College intervenes**

At any rate, in May 1972 the College passed a resolution at National Council, noting that it had studied the state submissions and supported the claim that:

*there exists a great unmet need in the state government schools, the independent schools and the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory, if Australia's children are to get the primary and secondary education that parents and teachers expect in the society of today.*<sup>16</sup>

Rather weakly, the College resolution argued that:

*While admitting that it is difficult to express the cost of satisfying these needs in precise figures, and of making adequate allowances for inflationary forces on the one hand, and a different deployment of resources on the other, it feels that the figure must be somewhere near the \$1400 million deficit arrived at by the conference of state ministers, to which must be added the extensive needs of the independent schools.*<sup>17</sup>

The College communicated its resolution to the Prime Minister, receiving an acknowledgement on 5 July 1972. Minutes of the College Council meeting in October revealed that the College President William Oats and Council Member Professor Richard Johnson had amplified the College's views at a personal meeting with Minister Fraser, proposing the establishment of a national commission to review priorities in Australian education. The Minister bluntly rejected the proposal, but invited the College to submit comments on national priorities directly to him. During subsequent discussion by the Council, the idea that the College itself might convene an Inquiry was canvassed but rejected, noting that State Premiers preferred the use of existing machinery.<sup>18</sup>

The College perhaps missed an opportunity to pre-empt the Karmel Committee and play a larger role in policy formulation, but that would no doubt have been beyond its meagre staff resources. Moreover, the somewhat patronizing tone of Minister Fraser revealed in the Minutes' account of the meeting would not seem to hold much promise of a satisfactory response.

In any case the McMahon government was in a terminal position by the second half of 1972. Although ignoring the States' survey of needs, the government announced a five-year plan of capital assistance for schools in May 1972, to start from 1 July 1973. Political panic trumps rational policy development at such a time; as Harman and Smart concluded:

*the government was defeated at [the 1972] election, perhaps partly because its response to educational demands was typically ad hoc and lacked the coherence and generosity of the education policies proposed by the ALP Opposition.*<sup>19</sup>

## References and Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Darling to Menzies, 27/7/59; cited in History of the Australian College of Education, 1987, draft in MS, p. 249, ACEOA Box 010-01
- <sup>2</sup> Darling, interview, October 1982, cited in History of the Australian College of Education, loc. cit., p. 249
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 250
- <sup>4</sup> Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, House of Representatives, 26 July 1945
- <sup>5</sup> Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, House of Representatives, 6 May 1958
- <sup>6</sup> The process is described in detail in I K F Birch and D Smart, *The Commonwealth Government and Education 1964-1976*. Melbourne: Drummond, 1977. The engagement of the Commonwealth in supporting school libraries is outlined in Archival Brief No. 7.
- <sup>7</sup> *The Nation-Wide Survey of Educational Needs*. Australian College of Education, undated but apparently late 1972, ACEOA Box 032-05
- <sup>8</sup> Hon. Malcolm Fraser, Ministerial Statement on the Commonwealth Education Programme for 1971-75, 5 October 1971; excerpt in ACEOA Box 032-05
- <sup>9</sup> Department of Technical Education NSW, *Survey of Needs for Technical Education in New South Wales, 1971-75*. Sydney, 1971, ACEOA Box 032-05
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 2
- <sup>11</sup> Applying ABS GDP deflator, bringing \$1.8b to 2008 dollars; thanks to National Centre for Vocational Education Research for providing the index.
- <sup>12</sup> Hon. Malcolm Fraser, Ministerial Statement on the Commonwealth Education Programme for 1971-75, 5 October 1971. ACEOA Box 032-05
- <sup>13</sup> *The Nation-Wide Survey of Educational Needs*. Australian College of Education, undated but apparently 1972, ACEOA Box 032-05
- <sup>14</sup> Fraser, loc. cit., various pp.
- <sup>15</sup> Australian College of Education, *The Purposes of Schools*, draft in MS, June 1973, ACEOA Box 032-05
- <sup>16</sup> The Australian College of Education, *The Nation-Wide Survey of Educational Needs, Resolution*, 1972. ACEOA Box 032-05
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> Minutes of the 55<sup>th</sup> Meeting of Council, 27 October 1972
- <sup>19</sup> Harman, G & Smart, D, *Constitutional Responsibility for Education in Australia*. Canberra: ANU Press, 1975, p. 25

Dr Robin Ryan is adjunct lecturer in educational leadership and management at Flinders University and a member of the Editorial Board of the National Centre for Vocational Education Research in Adelaide. He was previously the South Australian TAFE agency's Assistant Director for Policy and Intergovernmental Relations.