

**An address for the Teaching Australia Network Forum
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'Education's changing context and possible futures'

by Don Aitkin

I should probably first set out my credentials for speaking to you today, for they are additional to any you have heard in that kind introduction. I am the son of two teachers who first met in the headmaster's study of Telopea Park High School in Canberra when both were posted there in 1929. Several of my uncles became high school teachers, and my two brothers and I all taught at universities. About half my high school graduating class in 1953 became teachers. I have also talked to kids from pre-school up, to adult education groups, to farmers, to university classes all over the world, to U3A, and to the very old. Teaching is a part of me, as is its counterpart, learning. I am still intensely interested in both aspects of education, though it is now 65 years since I entered first class at Ainslie Infants School in Canberra.

Rhetoric without action

I began writing this address a month ago, a little unsure both of what you are about, and of what I should say. What I have heard since the meeting began has been reassuring, at least to some degree. Education in Australia is distinguished by an abundance of uplifting rhetoric and a dearth of comparable action. You heard a splendid example of the former in the letter from Minister Julia Gillard, which was almost certainly written in her Department. Its rhetoric was superb, but of promise of action there was almost nothing. The reasons are not hard to find. Almost everybody thinks that the education of our children is one of the most important activities of our society. But we do not agree wholeheartedly wherein that importance lies. Some think that choice is at the heart of it. Others think that the education of the whole child is the kernel. Still others think that we should bring back Latin, or compulsory sport, or whatever. We know that education is supremely important in conveying our society into the future, but we don't agree about what that future should be like, or what we have most to fear in it. For all of us, I should think, while the future of Australia's children is of great importance, the future of our own children is even more important. We might put that bundle of connected ambiguities together as Reason 1.

Reason 2 is that education is a large industry, and schoolteachers, at 225,000 or so, are one of Australia's largest occupational categories. Big systems are hard to shift. Sir Rod Carnegie once responded to an enquiry of mine about how powerful he felt as the Managing Director of CRA by saying that CRA, then valued at \$10 billion, was like a ship weighing ten billion tonnes, with him as its captain, moving on through the Pacific. 'Full speed astern!' he might cry, and some time later he could see that perhaps the ship had slowed down a little. Each of us may have views about what should happen in education, or in primary schooling, or in the teaching of mathematics, or in the education of boys. But the

education system is so large that the changes we would like to see are hard to implement effectively, even if we are the government. And even then, nothing will happen quickly.

Reason 3? I would put that as vested interest. Every school is one, every curriculum, every system; at the level of the individual, every teacher. So is every university, every faculty, every department. So, of course, is every professional association, every trade union, every state. We are often convinced that change should occur, but usually somewhere else: as we see it, our own patch needs to be enhanced, protected and strengthened, rather than changed. We have invested a lot of time and energy into what presently is, and have hopes for the future. We do not want our investment threatened, and we can all supply a dozen good grounds to enlist your support. I heard wrnings to tht effect in the opening contributions this afternoon.

Put those three reasons together and you have some sense of why it is that despite education's high place in the list of important issues to people at election time, very little that happens after an election seems to involve education. It is a big system, full of competing interests, that costs a great deal and is hard to change. Simply managing it from day to day, and dealing with the countless issues that arise, such as too much heat, too much cold, last night's vandalism, allegedbsexual harassment, child abuse, fire, storm, and the like, is vexatiously hard for those who have that responsibility, at most levels. But of course the education system does change, and in this address I want to point to some of the more important changes and, at the end, suggest a few more changes in the future that we might work for.

The way it once was

One great change is the way in which Australians have shifted their attitude to education, for their children and for themselves. When I was in school myself, in the 1940s and early 1950s, it was customary for most kids to leave school at 15 with or without the Intermediate Certificate. Australia had its usual labour shortage, and there were jobs everywhere, many of them requiring little but physical strength and a preparedness to put that strength to someone else's purpose if the price were right. Family incomes were not high, but the wage range was about 1 to 3, so that an extra income, even of a 15-year old boy, was a useful addition to the family. Those of us who went on to senior high school were a small minority, and we were not so much the brightest kids in the school as the children of those parents who thought more education was a good thing for us, either in itself or as a conduit to a better job later. That had been the state of affairs since the beginnings of formal education in the late 19th century, and indeed I was lucky to live in New South Wales, where public high schools had been created early in the new century — and in the country, where I lived, as well as in the city. In other states publicly-funded high schools had still to be created in any number.

The relatively low level of education of the general Australian population had, paradoxically, a positive effect on the respect with which teachers, and indeed all

educated persons, were held. My father, a Broken Hill boy who taught in Newcastle during the depression, told me of his being asked to help local organisations and the parents of his students with quite simple matters such as the filling-out of a form, or preparing an application for something, and of the gratitude and respect that followed. He was educated. Teachers counted for something. He had another story, of the late Clarrie Martin, another Broken Hill boy, also a schoolteacher but afterwards a NSW politician and Attorney-General. Martin had gone to a union meeting, wanted to speak on an issue at the same time as another, older man. Clarrie got the call, but declined graciously. 'No, Mr Chairman, I defer to So-and-so...', an action that won general approval. Later on there was an election for delegate, and Clarrie found himself nominated, and enthusiastically elected, as 'the man who "deferred" ...' That, so the story goes, was the start of his political career. Educated people knew the forms, they knew how to do things properly, and teachers were the common standard of the educated person for the general population, partly because their business was education, and partly because they were visible and available.

Postwar change

By the time I was a senior undergraduate, in the middle 1950s, that attitude towards education began to change, and it changed fundamentally over the next generation. Three powerful engines of change were at work. The first was the rapid increase in knowledge that had been produced by the war and by the business of postwar reconstruction. There were new labour-saving machines, and a greater need for people who could read quickly, write well and count. The second engine was the growing flood of immigrants, who were united in the belief that their own sacrifice would be justified if their children were well educated, and found good, professional jobs. For them, then as now, the education system was the escalator. The third was a somewhat unexpected economic boom, which kept employment high for thirty years and gave governments an annual discretionary bonus in revenue, which they used, among other things, to build schools and universities.

It now became important for boys and girls to complete high school and go on, if they could, to teachers college or university. By 1975 there were 1,100,000 students in Australia's secondary schools, and the proportions going on to the final year kept increasing. Where did the teachers come from? The new higher education system, itself expanding all the time, worked like a beaver to produce them, and provided opportunities for primary school teachers to obtain degrees, either in the evenings or by external delivery. A lot of those whose service began in the 1950s and 1960s found themselves teaching subjects they barely knew, or classes that were way too large, or pupils whose English was rudimentary at best. As I have written elsewhere, 'Classes in mathematics and science were hardest hit, if only because the numbers coming through the schools and universities with high performance in these areas had always been quite small. The schools never caught up, because the wider options for professional careers that came in the 1970s and 1980s meant much more competition for the better-performing graduates, especially those in mathematics and science.' Nonetheless, by the turn of the century 225,000 teachers in 10,000 schools were teaching

3,300,000 students. The universities, attracting lots of overseas students as well as a multitude of locals, had around a million students themselves. Education was big time.

But of course there were costs for being in the big time. Big costs. One of them was that teachers' salaries started to decline relative to average weekly earnings. Education was now a large item in both federal and state government budgets, and any increase in teachers' salaries meant not only a substantial increase in expenditure, but also the likelihood of flow-on to other professional areas. More and more Australians now work in what I would call professional careers: their work is based on their knowledge and their capacity continually to add to and refine that knowledge. We have seen the fear of this wages flow-on in the recent debate about the NSW budget. What is more, from the middle 1970s governments moved away from a Keynesian political economy to one more obviously Friedmanite, in which public borrowing was evil and balanced budgets nonetheless producing a handsome surplus were the way to go. This new political context was one in which governments tried to reduce expenditures rather than increase them. A generation of that, and Australia sat at the bottom of the OECD league table, along with the USA, Japan and Turkey, as societies that produced the least public revenue. Since teachers were mostly in the public employ, that position did not bode well for them.

And relative respect for teachers? That too had diminished, along with salaries, and along with the proportion of men in the teaching service. In fact, throughout the second half of the 20th century, one might have said that the respect in which all professions were held declined more or less in sympathy with the increase in the proportion of educated people. Part of it was simply that the respect of the uneducated for the knowledge and power of the educated cannot be maintained when the population is much better educated. Part of it was that the number of professions also increased, a function in turn of the need for and growth of knowledge. Each profession rather grudgingly admitted the association of the new. Medicos found that the great and noble appellation of 'doctor' was being appropriated by dentists and then by vets. Although primary school teaching soon acquired university status, nursing went off to the universities, too, as did accounting, and management, and design, and physiotherapy, and journalism, and chiropractic (not to mention once unheard-of professions, like tourism). Room had to be found for them all. Teachers were too numerous, too costly and not glamorous enough to maintain the high status they had enjoyed in the 1930s. What is more, all professions found themselves jockeying for a seat at the decision tables of governments, proclaiming their own virtue, fighting over salaries and conditions, arguing with one another over boundaries, and generally demonstrating that they were about money, like everyone else. The notion that the learned professions had the interests of the public at heart — that professionals were basically altruistic — took a hard blow.

We should perhaps add something to this sad downward spiral. I tried to find the origin of the old quip: 'He who can, does. He who cannot, teaches.' When I was an undergraduate, our senior students doing the Dip.Ed. added the rider: 'He who cannot teach, teaches teachers'. One of my source books gives the

author of the first as George Bernard Shaw, but I am prepared to bet a small amount that it was older than Shaw. My new aid to discovery, Messrs Google, took me to a blog that told me Aristotle had a more positive spin on things: 'Those that know, do. Those that understand, teach.' Alas, none of my source books shows Aristotle as having said anything so useful, though he did remind us that 'Education is the best provision for old age' and that 'The educated are as much superior to the uneducated as the living are to the dead'.

I went down this path to remind you all that no other profession encounters quite the same engagement from the community as does teaching. Since virtually everyone has gone to school, and is an unchallenged authority on what went on there at the time, and since all of us engage in teaching our children and friends, when we are knowledgeable in an area and they are not, all of us know best about what should happen in school, and especially what should happen to our child there. So the decline in respect for the educated person that I have referred to has been assisted by the growing confidence of many in the community that they know as much about the classroom as any teacher. Fran Hinton referred to what I would call 'the new disparagement' in her opening remarks. Furthermore, as too many teachers know to their cost, some parents are prepared to come to the school and tell the teacher straightforwardly what they are to do with respect to little James or Jenny. Or else. I think it is fair to say that most parents of the 1940s would have avoided their child's school, and feared any request to visit it.

You might think that what I have been saying is rather negative, and to a degree it is. But in my experience it has been so since I was a small boy listening to my parents talk about the problems of the 1940s and the effect that the New Education Fellowship might have. It is not new. Education always has problems, wherever and whenever you are. But perhaps it's time to move past problems to possibilities, and in what remains of my time I'd like to use the Charter of Teaching Australia to suggest some positive ways forward for 2020, a year which is going to be greatly saddled with expectation. I ought to say that little of what I want to talk about has much to do with a federal Labor Government that has talked of its plans for an 'education revolution'. The reasons are obvious enough. As I have just said, the education systems of our nation are so large that involving them in a revolution is a recipe for disaster; incremental change that is supported by a strong body of opinion seems to me the best way to go. And I would have wanted to say much the same things were the Coalition still in office. What might be done is independent of which party or parties are in office in the Commonwealth or the states.

Clearing the ground

Let me start with four pieces of ground-clearing. The first is a bow to Howard Gardner, the creator of the theory of 'multiple intelligences'. I don't have to tell an audience like this about Gardner and his work, but I could say that my whole working life provides a kind of independent verification of his theory, for I have seen hundreds of high schools built, the universities transformed, the numbers of first class honours graduates blossom, and the number of PhDs run into the thousands. I have been an examiner, too, and I will say firmly that standards

have not declined. Like Gardner, I have come to the view that every baby is born with great potential and abundant talent. One great success of our education systems over the past sixty years has been its role in developing that talent and nurturing that potential. Today's Australia, creative, inventive, productive, three times as wealthy as its counterpart after the second world war, could not have existed without the growing recognition that children could achieve a lot if they were encouraged and prepared. It was our schools, our universities and our teachers who brought about this transformation.

Now let me contrast that success with one sign of social failure. Our prison system holds 25,000 or so people whom we keep there at roughly the cost of their staying at a first-class hotel, though with rather less apparent comfort. About seven per cent of them are women. Far too many of them are indigenous people, most of them are under 40, and their educational levels are low. Somehow or other they have missed out on the great good that the education systems can produce. The cost of the Australian criminal justice system, all up, is about \$8 billion a year. I do not suggest at all that we could do without it, but I put to you the thought that more attention to developing the talents and nurturing the potential of all boys and youths would allow us to reduce that \$8 billion to something rather smaller. We might all feel a little safer, as well.

From prisons to welfare. The Australian welfare system at the federal level costs in the order of \$60 billion a year. Quite a lot of it is income transfer, a process by which those in this audience and elsewhere who have been able to use their talents productively give up some of their hard-earned money to support others who have not been able to do so. Again, I do not suggest at all that we could achieve a society without a welfare system, or that such a society would be a desirable goal: catastrophes can strike any of us, and we need the security of mind that if that occurred something would be done. In any case, the fact of a good welfare system is surely part of the 'belonging' that makes us value our society. But I would put to you the thought that nurturing the potential and developing the talents of all our young people could reduce considerably the amount that we now spend on unemployment relief and various other Bandaid remedies for social failure. It is a truism, frequently pronounced by ministers and other people of importance, that there is no future any more for people who lack a decent education. Yet we seem to think, or at least to act, as though the initiative must come from the uneducated themselves. That is a true Catch-22. We could and should do better than this, and it would be cheaper in the long run if we did.

A century and more ago it was widely believed by progressive people that if only every person had the vote, then governments would, almost by necessity, have to be of the people, by the people and for the people. It was only sort of true, as we discovered when everybody did have the vote. Not so much longer afterwards, it was believed by progressive people that if there were good schools for everyone then our society would become a true society of equals. That was only sort of true too. The Jesuits are said to have asserted that the first five years of a person's life were crucial in their shaping, and much of what we have learned in the past fifty years about babies and infants bears this out. It is not

enough simply to have good schools available for everyone. The schools have to be valued, and education itself has to be valued, and the child must have a positive expectation about school that is reinforced by experience there and then supported at home. In short, as every teacher knows, many school problems are brought there from the home. And that brings me to the last of my four pieces of ground-clearing.

I am coming to the view that while the State has no business enquiring about what goes on in the bedroom of the citizen, it has a legitimate interest in one of the common products of bedroom activity, the new child. If children are born into indifferent or neglected households, if their existence is secondary to that of the parent or parents, if they are poorly loved, poorly fed, not introduced to reading and books and the life of imagination, not encouraged, if their intellectual diet is simply TV — it is simply impossible for any school to make up for these deficiencies, and to give such children the same experience as that of a child who has been more fortunate in his or her choice of parents. At very level, it seems to me, our schools are too often forced to become remedial custodians of children whose life chances are already much less than they should be. Somehow or other, we need to have, not a revolution in education, but a revolution in baby-making, in parenting. To have a child is to accept a huge responsibility and a future expenditure of hundreds of thousands of dollars on the baby's needs. Bribing women to have a child with the promise of a cash payment of \$5,000 when the child is born seems to me to have been one of the most asinine pieces of policymaking in the past century. We already have nearly 400,000 single parents, who struggle to provide their child with everything, and so often do so at the risk of their own health. This is a wider field of debate than that which you might have thought I would enter on, but I do not think schools should be placed in the role of remedying parental deficiencies, and I will go on to say, a little later, that this might be an area where Teaching Australia and the Network could give some voice.

Five small habitations for the future

Now that I have cleared the ground, let me finally offer you five small habitations to place on it. They may yet be small, but each can be built on, because each has a strong base. Linked together, they provide an even stronger base. The first habitation is the centrality of good education for the future of any society. It is as important as defence, as important as the economy. We should say so, and keep on saying so. The economy can make us richer, but good education can make us more creative, more self-confident, more altruistic, more co-operative — at any level of wealth. Indeed, I would argue that the search for more wealth as a guide to the meaning of life is ultimately empty, whereas developing one's creativity is not. Moreover, the incessant demand that the economy grow, and that the growth be measured in terms of what can be made and consumed, is threatening our whole society. We need a more sustainable sense of what life is for, and education is much likely to provide it than is the economy.

My second building is the value that we should place on learning, teaching and teachers. The path from my first habitation to the second is a straight one. If education is central to our future, then we should invest in it properly. One consequence of doing so would be that 'education' became a whole-of-government responsibility. I guess that there would still be a minister with responsibility for education, but in the states that person might well be the premier. (For those who wonder what would be happening with 'health' in this brave new world, my reply would be that through better education we would be involved in ensuring our own 'well-being', so that the need for huge medical facilities to deal with ill-health and disease would be becoming a thing of the past.)

Investing here, in my view, is not so much a matter of capital as it is of recurrent expenditure. Over the past fifty years Australia has built high schools in every town of a size that would warrant such a building, and we have built so many primary schools that some have had to be closed because of our falling birthrate. Howard Gardner said somewhere that the only really fundamental change in school education in the past few hundred years has been bringing the children in out of the rain. My proposal is that we put much more into recurrent expenditure, reduce class sizes, and deal properly with the failures of our social system, by ensuring that no child is forgotten, however difficulty they are and however adverse their circumstances. You will remember my warning that we can always increase the size of prisons.

Some of you may be worried about the consequent increase in expenditure, but I move you quickly to my third building, where your worries will grow even larger, for here teachers are paid properly. Since I don't quite know what that level is, I am proposing to double all teachers' salaries. At the same time, I want some far-reaching changes made to the preparation of teachers. Zoltan Kodaly, the Hungarian composer who served for a time as the eminence in education in his country, was able to have ordained that no one could become a primary school teacher unless he or she could read music. Other *diktats* of this kind have been imposed and proposed elsewhere. Let there be no anxiety here. If the profession of teaching is valued enough, those who wish to enter it will do whatever has to be done to enter. In the whole-of-government context in which I see teaching and learning, the recognition that good teaching and good learning are in the top few priorities for our country ensures that the preparation and 'compensation' for teachers is seen as really serious stuff. 'Where will all the money come from?' I hear you cry. Ah, well, you will remember that Australia is presently one of the lowest-taxed societies in the world. We certainly have the capacity to pay more for education if the will is there. My guess is that the 'no borrowing, low tax' regime of the last twenty years is due for some revision anyway, as we recognize that our society does need more public goods, unless we are prepared to live in a society that is comfortable with the very rich in their gated communities avoiding the beggars on the streets.

There are still three more habitations to inspect. But I can be quick if you can. You arrive at the fourth on a straight path from the second building, which housed education as a whole-of-government activity. In this one our society

comes to terms with the business of baby-making, ensuring that so far as possible children are created when the best conditions for their success as future adults are available. There are always difficult arguments here, but there is also a great reluctance to see the schools serve as remedial way-stations for inadequate thought, preparation and follow-through on the part of parents. What is involved, of course, is another form of education, that of us all, in our capacities as sexual beings, future lovers and parents. The last government made a tentative start here with Parenting Australia. I like what has been done on its website, but it doesn't tackle the fundamental question, of whether or not now is the right time, all things considered, for a child to be conceived at all.

The fifth habitation is for experimentation. That will be an important part of the brave new world. Perhaps because of our statewide systems, and perhaps because we have been so concerned with equality, deliberate experimentation in education has in the past been hard to organise. We need more of it, and some of that will come anyway as the old statewide structures give way to more regional and more local initiatives, where different practices and trials occur because they seem sensible in that locale. The brave new world will be intensely interested, also, in the outcomes of experiments. We will know that there is always more to learn.

And the final house? That is for standards, for professional accreditation, for encouragement, and occasionally only, we hope, for chastisement — even for de-registration. Ultimately, surely, teachers will be seen as professionals whose career and progression are subject in part to their sense of collegiality. Like all other professionals of any consequence, they will belong to and respond to a body of like-minded colleagues whose values and experience they share and whose leaders are taken very seriously in the rest of our society.

There you are. In the clearing you can see five small but strong houses in which the basis for the future of education in our country can be inspected. There are many other houses further away, but we have not time to go into them. There are houses for universities, for life-long learning, for adult education, for technical education, for language, mathematical, scientific, sporting education. In time they can form part of the second and higher storeys of the education building. But all of them have grown from this small set of five, because these ones lie at the heart of teaching and learning. I hope that during your deliberations today and tomorrow you will feel the urge to go into these houses, so that we move from the past and the present into a better future for teachers, learners and education generally. To do so will be both an act of faith and an act of optimism.