AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Although my departure from the Commonwealth Parliament was not of my own volition, I am grateful for the opportunity that this pause has given me to reflect upon many of the issues which were of interest to me during my period as a Senator for New South Wales. One of these opportunities is to be able to express a purely personal point of view on a number of subjects, unencumbered by the restraints and constraints of party politics and formal party policy. It should thus be clear from the outset that the views offered in this article are purely my own, and in no way represent or seek to represent the views or policies of the Liberal Party, the Fraser Government or anybody else.

In commenting on the future of Australian universities in the society of the late twentieth century, I think it of some importance to explore the major historical factors which have shaped the political and educational debate about universities in this country. To my mind they are unique to Australia in a number of respects, and provide many of the explanations for the difficulties which I think that our universities have had, and will have increasingly, in their attempts to adjust to new social and political realities.

When the Murray Committee reported in 1957 it found it necessary to open its report with a long chapter entitled 'The Role of the Universities in the Community'. This report set a great deal of the tone of subsequent discussion about universities, with its heavy emphasis upon universities as institutions designed to produce good citizens:

It is the function of the university to offer not merely a technical or specialist training but a full and true education, befitting a free man and the citizen of a free country 1

The good university must always aim to put out men and women who in spite of the differences in their specialisms and vocations can live harmoniously and use their specialised powers to serve their generation in a free society . . . ²

... in addition to the two aims of education and research, universities have a third function. They are, or they should be, the guardians of intellectual standards, and intellectual integrity in the community ... 3

Footnote

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I do not think that it would be of much benefit to try to weigh up the achievements of Australia's universities against the Murray standards, but I have no doubt that these sentiments have had a significant bearing on the thinking of many Australian politicians — men essentially of the older generation — who have played important roles in shaping national education policy.⁴

By the time the Martin Committee reported in 1964, there was already clear evidence of a shift in attitude on the part of Australia's educational planners and thinkers about the role of the university in Australian society.

Although Martin made the necessary acknowledgements of the older tradition:

The human values associated with education are so well recognised as to need little elaboration, but the Committee emphasises that they are the very stuff of a free, democratic and cultured society.⁵

it did not take them very long to shift their arguments for greater government support for education onto a more economic footing:

If a community devotes additional resources to education, growth is likely to be fostered in at least four main ways. Firstly, the work force should itself become more skilled and efficient at doing a given task. Secondly, existing knowledge may be applied more rapidly in the modernisation of capital equipment, and in the introduction of new products and for new methods of producing old products. Thirdly, new knowledge may be acquired. Fourthly, improved methods of management, whether at the level of decision-making or at that of detailed control, may become available.⁶

It strikes me that the Martin philosophy had come a long way from the Murray philosophy, but the two between them illustrate to a very great extent the nature of the competing forces (essentially liberal intellectual versus economically beneficial) which have contended within the political system when the questions of resource allocation in education come to the fore for decision and debate.

It should not be thought that the even older, essentially British ideals of academia and its place in Australian society were absent throughout this period. They had their champion in the almost legendary Sydney University professor John Anderson. Against the rising tide of economic arguments, he railled:

University teachers in general are more and more taking on the character of coaches and ushers, concerned with getting students through ("eliminating wastage" as the phrase goes) and not with finding out who is capable of rising, under a certain intellectual stimulus, to a certain intellectual standard - a standard which can only be aped, not attained, by those who have been given "personal assistance". and shown the methods of passing . . . we have to take a pluralist view of the University as well as of society in general and to see that. within any so-called academic institution. there are non-academic and anti-academic activities — that what is academic (for it is a guestion of movements and traditions, and not of "individuals") has to fight for survival against pseudo-academic Philistinism as well as against the incult social mass, that the struggle of culture against "bourgeois society" exists also on the campus . . . ?

Anderson's views cannot be ignored, as he was quite demonstrably a significant influence upon a large number of persons whose subsequent careers took them into politics (essentially in the Liberal Party) and into important positions vis-a-vis the making of education policies throughout the whole of Australia.⁸

For reasons which need not detain us here, but which are nevertheless worthy of speculation by others, the Australian universities have never played, nor indeed sought to play the same sort of role in the intellectual life of Australia as their counterparts have done in either the United Kingdom or the United States.

Clearly there has never been an Australian version of the Oxford Movement. Perhaps that is not surprising. But equally there has never been an Australian version of the New Cambridge or Chicago School of economic thought — something arising within the intellectual framework of the university which reaches out to capture policy makers and governments alike.

Whatever the reason for this, I am sure that it has nothing to do with age. The influence of the newer institutions in the United Kingdom and the United States is just as profound as that of Oxbridge or the Ivy League. One only has to think of M.I.T. or U.C.L.A. in comparison with the age of Australia's oldest universities. One has only to think of the enormous impact of the Science Policy Research Unit at Sussex University in comparison with the age of some of Australia's younger institutions.

The gap between Australia's universities and the mainstream of the Australian community is enormous — not only in intellectual circles, but in terms of the relationships between the universities and industry, or between the universities and the arts, or between the universities and the political system itself. Recent reports by the Australian Science and Technology Council (ASTEC), or a close reading of the debates which proceeded the establishment of the separate Film and Television School would illustrate some of these points. ¹⁰

There is not, mercifully, anything akin to the British old-boy network based on Australia's universities (although the same cannot be said for its private schools), despite the criticisms frequently made in the past about the recruitment patterns of the Department of Foreign Affairs.

Thus I would contend that from the days of Murray onwards, the universities grew very much separately from the growth that was taking place in the rest of Australian society. Although this has been a point of criticism from my perspective, I am sure that it also allowed the universities to develop with far less political interference than might have been the case had they been more actively involved in other social developments. Throughout the Menzies era the growth of Commonwealth concern and support for universities was considerable, but the amount of time actually taken by the Government or by the Parliament in actually debating educational issues was almost negligible.

The winds of political change however soon sprang up all around. Strangely enough, while the Whitlam Government promoted many innovations and reforms in education (most notably with the Schools Commission and the TAFE Commission), its impact on the universities as such was not dramatic. The abolition of fees generally failed to achieve some of the more hopeful predictions of its proponents, while the acceleration of expenditure (especially on capital works) was in many ways a two-edged sword. Labor's sole Education Minister (Kim Beazley) was an Education Minister in the old style, whose speeches reflected the Murray type of philosophy, and rarely if ever came to grips with some of the growing financial issues which emerged in the early 1970s. 11

The return of the Fraser Government coincided with a new economic era for Australia — economies and cuts were the order of the day, and education having been seen by many as one of the pampered playthings of the socialist government was one of the obvious targets. The new Government soon commissioned two major inquiries, one into Education, Training and Employment, and the other into Technological Change in Australia. Both were headed by very senior university vice-chancellors (and subsequent knights), Bruce Williams of Sydney and Rupert Myers of New South Wales.

Both told the Government exactly what it wanted to hear, that universities should be more cost-efficient¹² and that greater emphasis should be placed on the provision of basic skills to equip students for direct places in the workforce. ¹³ The Williams Inquiry made one of its major recommendations:

that undergraduate entry to universities should be related more closely to the statistical probability of success in degree studies and that in universities there should be a greater concentration of honours and post-graduate activities (including non-award courses for graduates), more research centres....¹⁴

Finally, by way of historical perspective I would draw attention to the notable absence of the universities from the mainstream of political debate and activity in Australia. I am by no means decrying the lack of an Australian Berkeley or Nanterre, 15 but rather drawing attention to the limited role which Australian universities have played in this respect.

During my days on campus (1965-1969) there was only one issue of any significance taken up by the student movement, and that was conscription. Viet Nam certainly became a political issue of significance, but for most students, their interest in Viet Nam arose only after the introduction of conscription. During my period as the chairman of the Government Members' Education Committee in the Federal Parliament, the representatives of the student organizations really only sought to 'heavy' me in any sense on the issues of fees, the introduction of a loans system and the issue of compulsory membership of student organizations; while the only time that groups like FAUSA showed much interest was when study leave or postgraduate awards were under discussion.

This is natural enough, to be concerned essentially with one's own self-interest, but the impression which it leaves in the minds of the political decision-makers is that people in the universities are no different from any other self-interested group or sectional interest in the community. ¹⁶ The failure of the universities to lobby, press, or even speak up for other groups on other issues has meant that their political value in the wider community has been reduced to virtually zero.

I must however pause to acknowledge one report, one public argument which stands apart from what I have previously been saying about the universities and their self-interested and essentially conservative role in the development of Australian society. In December 1974 the Government received the report of the Committee on Open University. It is wide-ranging survey of the educational needs of various groups in Australia, its acknowledgement that:

... significant barriers to access to tertiary education still exist in a number of areas . . . ¹⁸

and its considered and careful recommendations for the establishment of a National Institute for Open Tertiary Education were never acted upon. The responsible Minister at the time (Kim Beazley) has written that:

It was the victim of the economic turndown.19

I have taken a long digression into the past, but one which I feel was necessary to set the background which colours the way in which the political sector has approached the university sector in Australia. Because of the relative isolation of the university sector — isolation from political activity, isolation from commerce and industry, isolation from what intellectual debate there is, isolation from the arts and crafts of the community — it has been possible for successive governments of both persuasions not to have to invest too much time and effort in thinking about the basic issues in university development. Rather it has allowed them to turn the debate essentially into one about money and the alleged value for money spent in the tertiary sector.

I think that given this premise we can now turn to a more general discussion of the future of the universities.

Not surprisingly, the first place to start has to be with the question of money. As I have previously said, money is the core of all the political and parliamentary debates about education in Australia. Very rarely does the Federal Parliament bother with debates about qualitative issues in Australian education; the debates are monotonously debates about quantitative issues.²⁰

The most recent report of the Tertiary Education Commission was clearly aware of these constraints. and its eventual recommendations for expenditure for both capital and recurrent expenditure on universities and colleges of advanced education in the 1982/84 triennium was fully some \$200 million (about 4.4%) less than the figure requested by the two Councils.21 In addition, the Commission did not seek to derogate from any of the Williams recommendations on mergers and amalgamations of tertiary institutions, and sought an expansion in the tertiary sector only for such matters as the establishment of a school of fisheries, another school of business studies, greater expenditure on nurse education and community language courses and the introduction of feeder and bridging courses.22 All of these proposals to move into new fields demonstrate a willingness to respond to proposals only where some clear national and economic advantage is perceived as being served or advanced.

At the same time as the squeeze is being placed on the tertiary sector in terms of universities and colleges, there is a marked movement by the Government in support of greater expenditure on technical and further education — the move towards immediately cost beneficial education for jobs and skills continuing to be apparent. ²³ There is no reason to believe that this trend will not continue for some time into the future. Similarly, economic issues lie very much at the heart of attempts to raise the level of staff numbers in universities who are employed on a contract rather than a tenured basis, much to the dismay of many of those with self-interest to defend.

A recent Government publication put out by the Federal Minister for Education (Mr Fife) encapsulates this philosophy of value for money in education, particularly pointing out whose responsibility it is to achieve it. The publication carries a 'message' from the Minister in the following terms:

Unless the present community and those who administer the schools and other educational facilities make the right decisions now, ensure that funds are made available for the right purposes, correctly anticipate problems and act to meet them, stamp out areas of disadvantage and provide the very best educational services that can be achieved, we are putting the future of Australia at risk... Those of us in the Commonwealth and State Governments who are responsible for deciding all aspects of Australian education aim to distribute available resources in ways which will produce the best results educationally and, at the same time, in ways that are efficient and cost effective.²⁴

In recent years a number of Government Committees and Parliamentary Committees²⁵ have recommended the strengthening of evaluation procedures throughout all Government services. This has already had some impact in fields such as health and welfare. Universities need to be acutely aware of the need for better evaluation procedures on their part. In a paper presented to a Conference entitled "A New Era for Tertiary Education" held in 1980 at the Darling Downs Institute of Advanced Education, Peter Chippendale, Head of the Education Policy Research Unit at the Institute spoke of the

fundamental importance of the evaluation and modification of prevailing institutional structures in any attempt by tertiary institutions to meet the new and unique educational demands of an emergent post-industrial society.²⁶

Chippendale's comments should not be restricted to an evaluation of institutions alone; unless universities in particular want to see Governments doing this job for them (as they are increasingly prepared to do), then they must provide clear public evidence of their own willingness to subject their employment, teaching, budgetary and planning practices to more rigorous analysis, and must demonstrate a far greater willingness to perform radical surgery where this is clearly shown to be needed.^{26A}

This requires an openness on the part of Australian university administrators which has been conspicuously absent until now. Whenever funds for universities are cut there is generally a loud cry from the immediate academic community, but hardly ever a peep from the more general community - they have never felt themselves in any sense an ally of the universities (even those members of the general community who are graduates), and if anything, in Australia they are inclined to be suspicious of the universities as feather-bedded institutions in any case. This view has always been reinforced by the unwillingness of university administrations to take the public into their confidence and explain to them what the universities are doing with public money in the first place. It is another example of the unfortunate consequences of the universities developing in such a degree of social isolation as they have.

A need for greater evaluation may lead in the direction suggested by the Williams Committee, namely the need to be more selective about university entrance qualifications. This is hardly the place to debate that issue, but it does seem to me that continuing financial pressures will in fact force all tertiary institutions to become more selective. In part the universities may be able to avoid the full brunt of this problem, as many young Australians are making the decision for them. The recent Tertiary Education Commission report drew attention to what it felt was a disturbing trend which showed a marked decline in the numbers of young Australians progressing direct from school to universities and colleges.27 No doubt the economic situation of the present time is a major factor in this, but such a trend also reflects a vote of no confidence among young people who have decided, that contrary to the prevailing opinion of decades, a university degree is not necessarily going to improve their chances in the work place.

It is certainly not my intention to tread in the murky waters of the re-introduction of higher degree fees or the possibilities of student loans schemes.28 In summary it seems that most academics and representatives of students who have bothered to make their opinions public have come out against such proposals, although in my view, none of them has really been able to provide the sort of data to sustain some of their more exaggerated claims. There is no convincing and unambiguous data about the effects of the removal of first degree fees in 1972, for while the total number of enrolments showed an increase, they did not show that the poorer and less affluent sections of the community were the principal beneficiaries, given that the rationale of the move was to assist them specifically.

Equally confusing in the welter of claim and counterclaim has been the question of future demographic changes likely in the Australian population. The rather pessimistic conclusions of the Borrie Report in 1975 were superceded by others which, like those advanced by Robert Birrell of Monash University,29 gave more encouragement to education planners by stressing that participation rates in higher education were likely to be constant in the 1980s and show only a small decline in the 1990s. However, a very recent study by Professor George Myers for the Social Welfare Policy Secretariat has once again focused attention on the 'greying' of the Australian population, with in fact a greater emphasis on the significant increase likely in the proportion of our citizens described as the "older-older" (i.e. seventy-five years and over) group.30 To all of this must be added the continuing uncertainty about levels of immigration, which have after all been the most important factor in slowing down the ageing of the existing Australian population.

In other words, a combination of financial pressures on institutions and individuals, together with a possible decline in the proportion of persons seeking to participate in tertiary education either by virtue of choice or age, is likely to produce a smaller, slimmer education sector than has been the case in the past.

On the other hand, the recommendations of both the Williams Committee and the Tertiary Education Commission on the subject of mergers and amalgamations appear to be sending the institutions in altogether another direction. The two may not be incompatible, indeed with fewer bodies to go around (hence fewer of those marvellous creatures the WSU and the EFTS) fewer institutions may make sense.

The imminent arrival of a generation with so much leisure time on their hands that they do not know what to do with it has been predicted since the start of the Industrial Revolution, and one wonders whether similar predictions made now are that much more likely to be correct. ³¹ Nevertheless the clear evidence of part-time and mature age enrolments at universities and colleges suggests that for an increasing number of people, education is in fact seen as one of the better ways to occupy otherwise leisure hours. Generally the academic community has responded well to the increase in mature age enrolments, but far less sympathetically to the rise in part-time numbers (after all they may have to be taught at inconvenient hours!)

It may not be the views of the academic community that prevail however as these part-timers are also electors, and to that extent are more likely to be able to exert political pressure to have their particular needs and requirements fulfilled through the political process.

Universities need, in this instance, as in so many others to develop a far greater flexibility in their planning and administrative strategies.

Ellice Swinbourne has spoken of this as indicating that

New forms of higher education will need to be evolved to satisfy community demands for more relevant associations of this type and for a better balance in the provision of education for adults and the young.³²

Although speaking specifically about problems facing the TAFE sector, the remarks of Colin Read are most pertinent. He writes

In the long run, the extent of change in TAFE institutions will be a function of the degree to which the future can be accurately predicted and the extent to which inbuilt flexibility is able to cope with unpredicted change...

In fact, change is the name of the game. In this decade, social attitudes, employer-employee relationships, the role of the individual, recognition of minority groups, technological developments, increasing international mobility and expanding communication networks all cause the individual's perception of the world to change.

But an educational organization is invested with resources, which, by their very nature, have a degree of inflexibility about them—land and permanent buildings impose constraints, and teaching staff are confined within their particular areas of expertise. In fact the greater proportion of both capital and recurrent expenditure is characterised by short-term inflexibility. Hence, spontaneous reaction to suddenly emerging social change tends to be inhibited by budget and resource commitments which often leave little margin for rapid adjustment. 33

This capacity to adjust to change will be the principal determinant of which educational institutions survive in the next couple of decades, as I have no doubt that some will in fact fail to adapt and will disappear as meaningful pieces on the educational chessboard. ³⁴ Many institutions and indeed many educationalists still believe that having survived the changes that have taken place in post-war Australia, they will be able to survive anything which the future might hold in store. They are likely to be sadly mistaken. It is not only that change is becoming ever more rapid, but it is also changing in a qualitative sense. As Alvin Toffler has remarked

...technological and social change is outracing the educational system, and ... social reality is transforming itself more rapidly than our educational images of that reality. as However perhaps the most important change facing the universities, and indeed all educational institutions in the not too distant future, will arise from changes in information technology and its associated hardware.

For many people the advent of cable television, a matter now under investigation by the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal, is seen as relevant only to an increase in public access to entertainment.36 However, as the experiences of the United States have shown, cable systems are increasingly being used by business for the transmission of data, and by private subscribers for the conduct of some of their business affairs such as banking and shopping. The growth of some of the more esoteric systems such as the Warner-Amex QUBE system in cities such as Cincinnati and Columbus (an inter-active system which allows subscribers to 'talk back' to the television set and to the presenters of programmes) have in fact excited educationalists who see a new role for themselves related exclusively to the provision of educational services via the television cable.37

The advantages for educational users of cable over conventional television are, in my view, considerable. This is not the place to explore them in detail; it is sufficient to say that one of the most important of these is economics.

We are unlikely to see cable flourishing in Australia within the next few years, indeed there are many opponents of its introduction, ³⁸ but I am sure that by the end of this decade cable will be a flourishing growth industry in Australia. Its implications for universities will be profound.

These are most likely to have their initial appeal to two classes of people, who are otherwise inhibited from making use of educational facilities as they currently exist. 39 These are people who seek enrolment as part-time students, but whose current employment situation has made it difficult for them to fit in with existing university and college timetables and regimes, and those who would like to update existing skills and qualifications with access to refresher courses.

Not far behind these will come those who seek to undertake essentially non-vocational courses, and those who see education as an increasingly attractive alternative in terms of the use of their expanded leisure periods.

This could well develop in such a way that the existing Australian universities would find themselves increasingly with less face to face teaching to do (and all the consequent problems arising from this) but with more and more resources available to direct into fields of research. Those who survive the best will be those who demonstrate the flexibility in terms of planning and administration of which I have already spoken.

Together with the domestic satellite, part of which will undoubtedly be dedicated to educational uses, ⁴⁰ the new communications technology will in fact mean that the basic proposals formulated in the Report 'Open Tertiary Education in Australia' will in fact be adopted in the long run.

The Open University committee was of course chaired by Professor Peter Karmel, and it looks very much to me, that just as his blueprint succeeded in New Guinea, and in the Schools Commission, and in the Universities Commission, and in the Tertiary Education Commission, so it is likely to succeed once again — a rather astonishing track record for any one individual, even of Professor Karmel's brilliance.⁴¹

The four key words for education in the next couple of decades are Economies, Evaluation, Flexibility and Technology. I have tried to say something about each of them.

In doing so I have neglected one area of critical importance to universities, or rather have touched upon it only very briefly. There is no doubt that the whole thrust of modern society, or modern technology, and indeed of clear government policies has been to indicate that Australia's future is intimately linked with its capacity to undertake quality research in a variety of fields and institutions. I believe that in the next few decades, universities will in fact have to devote more of their resources to research, even at the expense of having to take them away from teaching. 42 The continued decline of research efforts in the private sector and the current questioning by bodies such as the Industries Assistance Commission⁴³ of programmes such as the Industrial Research and Development Incentives Scheme all pressage a greater role for the universities in ensuring maximum national effort in this critical area.

Such a shift in emphasis, will I suspect, be of quantum proportions and will present yet another challenge to the planners and administrators very much along the lines which I have already suggested.

Throughout the whole of my argument, one theme has constantly been asserted, namely that the growth of Australian universities in relative isolation from the mainstream growth of Australian society has brought about a situation in which the universities have developed a degree of inflexibility which has hindered their capacity to adapt to rapid shifts in political, social, cultural and economic values. They have thus been left with few helpers outside their own ranks, and more importantly even fewer supporters among the political and economic decision-makers in the States or at the Commonwealth level.

In seeking to set themselves apart, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say, in allowing themselves to remain apart, the universities have found that when they have been threatened by the

cutting edge of governments, they have virtually no protection, and their cries for mercy have struck few responsive chords in the wider community.

It is not necessary for the values which underpin the operations of Australia's universities to change. Indeed there is still a real role for the Anderson style of philosophy, but it is necessary for the universities to become, and to be seen to become better 'citizens' than they have in the past. That is the essential challenge facing Australia's universities in the decades immediately ahead.

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- 6. ibid., para, 1.26.
- 7. J. Anderson, 'The Place of the Academic in Modern Society' *Honi Soit* 16 June 1960, p.5.
- See A.J. Baker, Anderson's Social Philosophy The Social Thought and Political Life of Professor John Anderson, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1979.
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- Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Technological Change in Australia (Myers Committee), AGPS, 1980, see at paras 7.106 to 7.112.
- 14. Williams Committee, op. cit., Volume I at page IV.
- 15. In the light of the Williams Committee comments cited above, it is interesting to note a comment relevant to the situation in France in 1968 as follows:

France is now thinking of introducing a selection system for university entrance. For one thing, the "open door" policy has proved intellectually disastrous: between a half and a third of students fail to get a degree.

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- 19. Beazley, op. cit., p.21 at fn. 2.
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