MAKING POLICY IN A DROUGHT: A REVIEW OF THE TERTIARY EDUCATION COMMISSION REPORT FOR 1982-84 TRIENNIUM, VOLUME 1 PART 1

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The TEC Report is one of those documents one tends to have a bad conscience about. Everyone in universities ought to read it, and hardly anyone actually does. Volume 1 Part 1 (I will explain the significance of the "parts" shortly) is a handsome 300-page volume in royal blue, written for the most part in splendidly indigestible bureaucratic prose. It is a working document, with a good deal of technical detail about universities, CAEs, and technical and further education (TAFE). It is also a highly political document, with a good many messages aimed both at the Federal Government and at the institutions of higher and technical education.

The aim of this review is to encourage people to read it for themselves. Since it doesn't make any sense outside its political and bureaucratic context, I thought the most useful thing to do would be to sketch in this background, and then comment on some of the things the document reveals — not always intentionally — about the current circumstances of higher education. I will concentrate mainly on the universities.

The TEC

Firstly, what is the TEC itself? Universities in Australia were created by deliberate acts of the State, and have always been dependent on State funding for their continued existence. For their first hundred years, however, from the 1850s to the 1950s, they remained pretty much independent institutions, outside the ambit of State policy in any very substantial sense. They were kept out of the clutches of the Departments of Education (or Public Instruction) when these were set up towards the end of the nineteenth century. One reason for their 'autonomy' was that they were quite cheap, being fairly small institutions as there was no mass demand for advanced education. Another was that the main services they provided, technical training for the professional intelligentsia and cultural polishing for the sons and daughters of the rich, were in themselves uncontroversial. There did not really have to be any policy about them — they just needed to be provided. It was a bit like the government providing a meteorological bureau, or a wharf.

This changed in the 1940s and 1950s, when higher education became very much a policy question for the State. The reasons for this are complex, and I can hardly explore the details now, but they include at least these four key points: (a) an increasing demand from capitalists and technocrats for a more highly-trained workforce to sustain the course of urban industrialization on which Australia was then set; (b) a markedly increased demand from the working class for more and better secondary education for their children, leading to a massive demand for trained teachers; (c) an expansion in other semi-professions (such as engineering, social work, etc.), increasing the pressure on training institutions; (d) an overall increase in what has been called 'credentialism', that is a demand from both employers and employees for certificates of skill, meaning that labour-market competition was increasingly conducted before entry to work. This resulted in both an inflation of the qualifications required to do existing jobs (lengthening of training courses, substitution of degrees for diplomas, etc.), and the invention of new qualifications for what had previously been uncertified jobs (social work being a prime example).

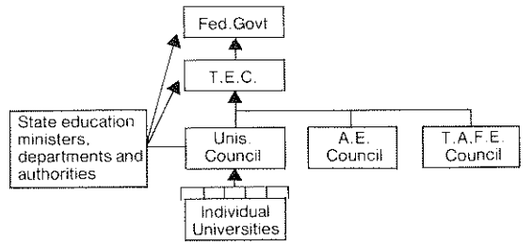
As the federal government was increasingly involved both in directing the process of capitalist industrialization (it was, for instance, centrally involved in launching the car manufacturing industry in the 1940s), and in trying to manage the social tensions that resulted from it, there was a logic in its situation that demanded it become involved with higher education. This was not a matter of Bob Menzies' personal benevolence in the cause of public enlightenment. Indeed it was the Labor Government of the 1940s that took the first steps to a federally-funded university system, with its promotion of a research university in Canberra, the original ANU. The big jump, nevertheless, came at the end of the 1950s, when the expansion was well under way, and the federal government moved in to fund and coordinate further development. The new universities of 1963-75, the great era of growth — Macquarie, Newcastle, Wollongong, Griffith, James Cook, Flinders, Deakin, La Trobe, Murdoch — are the products of this new phase of State interest in higher education.

There have been two main steps in the institutional control of the new flow of federal money. The first was the setting-up of a formal Commonwealth agency, the Australian Universities Commission, in 1959. With the growth of the CAEs in the 1960s, and increasing Commonwealth Government interest in technical education and schools, parallel bodies were set up for these sectors (the best known being the Schools Commission, 1973). In the mid-1970s* there was a re-organization, with the three post-school sectors being brought together under one umbrella, a super-commission called the Tertiary Education Commission.

This is a statutory authority composed of nine or so members, with a staff nominally of about 100, now cut back in the general trimming. Its full-time chairman at the time of the report was Peter Karmel. Three other members are respectively the commissioners for universities, advanced education, and TAFE. They in turn are chairpersons of three Councils (in our case, the Universities Council), likewise statutory committees of about the same size. They are the successors to the former specialized commissions, and are directly in touch with the institutions in each of the three sectors.

However, for all this apparatus, the T.E.C. does not actually make government policy on higher education. It merely advises the Federal Minister for Education, in this case, Wal Fife. Its detailed advice on funding, legislation, etc., goes into the bowels of the bureaucracy, its main lines are discussed by Liberal strategists, State ministers, and eventually by Cabinet. Since Fife is not a strong minister, education policy is particularly likely to be subject to the general pressures of the Government's economic and electoral strategy. What eventually emerges is not necessarily what the T.E.C. wanted — though it now has to administer the result.

As this has got a bit complicated, it may help to illustrate the main lines of communication by a diagram — again, focussing on the universities.



This illustrates the first phase of the business, when the Minister has formally asked for advice (!). The institutions formulate their demands, and shoot them in to the three Councils. Each Council winnows, trims, expostulates and endorses; then puts its submission in to the T.E.C. These submissions are published, no doubt in politely cleaned-up versions, as Vol. 1 Parts 2, 3 and 4 of the T.E.C. Report (separate booklets).

The T.E.C. itself winnows, trims, etc., and reflects on the relationship between the three, and then puts its submission in to the Minister. This is published as Vol. 1 Part 1 of the T.E.C. Report, i.e. the volume under review. There is also, confusingly, a Vol. 1 Part 5, containing the appendices for Part 1.

The Minister in his wisdom then tells the T.E.C. what it has got, the T.E.C. tells the Councils, the Councils tell the universities, etc. — i.e. much the same as the diagram, but with the arrows reversed. Volume 2 of the T.E.C. report is the detailed recommendations adjusted after the whole process is complete. It is the basis of the legislation by which Commonwealth money is actually appropriated for the institutions, mainly in the form of grants to the States.

The political/economic context: conservative education strategy

I left off the narrative to get on to the machinery at a crucial point. The TEC was not set up in 1977 by accident. This change in the administrative apparatus of higher education immediately followed decisive changes in the political and economic circumstances, the most dramatic of which were the overthrow of the Whitlam Government in November 1975 and the restoration of the Liberal-Country Party coalition, and the onset of a sustained world-wide recession.

In Australia, as elsewhere in the capitalist world, conservative strategists responded to the recession by arguing for a cut-back in the scale of state intervention, and in the size of the state itself. Not, be it noted, in all state functions; Fraser and his peers were not possessed with a holy zeal to dismantle the modern state as such. One of the first things Thatcher did on getting into power was raising the salaries of the police; and Reagan's incumbency is boom time for the military in the U.S. The crucial point was to reverse the gains made by the working classes of Western countries in the latter stages of the postwar long boom, and the accompanying squeeze on profits.

Along with a direct campaign to roll back real wages, or at least halt their growth, has come a conservative campaign to squeeze those parts of the state which provide the 'social wage': conspicuous among them, welfare and education. The object is a general redistribution of income back towards the rich. Partly this reflects the direct class interests of the Fraser Government — it is reputedly the wealthiest cabinet in Australian history. Partly it reflects the policy idea that to make a capitalist economy work successfully you have to make sure that capitalists in general do well out of it.

* This had been suggested in the early 1960s, but was rejected at the time by the Menzies government.

It is vital to see education policy in that context. Time and again I have heard people in education blithely assuming that a good 'educational-needs' case for expansion, or an irrefutable case that more cuts would damage an institution, would *have* to be accepted by the authorities — and then being baffled when it was not. There is nothing arbitrary here at all. We are up against a powerful tide of political strategy and class interest.

There are, nevertheless, a good many cross-currents. It is dangerous for politicians to take the axe to the roots of established institutions. The Fraser Government has been cautious, and has pruned rather than chopped. The T.E.C. itself, in a sense, is a product of this caution. It would not have been set up if the object was to slash higher education right back. Its brief was to rationalize an area of federal funding that was plainly going to continue at something like existing levels.

It was, nevertheless, wanted to perform somewhat different tasks. One of the first signs of the recession was a rising level of youth unemployment. This fed into a complex change in working-class attitudes to education, which is still working itself out, but which has certainly meant an end to the steadily growing educational demand of the previous three decades.

So far so good, from the point of view of conservative strategy — cuts in provision, and a shift of resources to private schools, could be presented as responses to popular distrust and dissatisfaction with state schools. Some conservatives even, for a couple of years, set up a brisk traffic in arguments blaming youth unemployment on the troubles of the schools (almost exactly the reverse of the truth). But this breaking of the boom-time nexus between schooling and employment also rapidly undermined the education system's ability to legitimate the inequalities of the labour market; and that was more dangerous from the conservatives' point of view. To have widely accepted legitimations of inequality is vital to a capitalist system; and if one set breaks down, another must be devised.

Accordingly the federal government rapidly developed a refreshing interest in transition education programmes, that would smooth the passage of working-class kids onto the labour market, and more generally in TAFE, formerly the Cinderella of the post-secondary education scene. So strong was this logic that it cut right across the famous 'new federalism' that the Government was also touting, by which as many functions as possible were to be handed back to the States. Federal intervention in TAFE grew, and funding expanded at a rate that would have done the Whitlam Government proud. (Commonwealth spending on TAFE climbed from $99.7 m in 1975 to $172.9 m in 1981 and the Commission's report suggested it should go on rising to $196.2 m in 1984).

Similar cross-currents stirred the schools, the CAEs, and the universities. The higher up you go on the education ladder, of course, the less the funding is directly part of the social wage to the working class, the more it becomes a subsidy to the already affluent. The universities' intake has always been drawn overwhelmingly from families in the upper reaches of the distributions of wealth and income; CAEs are biased in the same direction, but less so. Conservative policy then became a matter of attempting to redirect the energies of these institutions away from areas like social welfare and education, which represent an indirect subsidy to the social wage (in the form of training), and into areas like management, accountancy, engineering, and the like, which represent an indirect subsidy to capital (in the same form). This was accompanied by much wise talk of 'economic realities', 'industry liaison', and the like.

Rivalling this in the baldness of its hypocrisy was the reconstruction strategy aimed at schools, shifting resources from state schooling into the 'private sector'. There is, of course, no such thing as a 'private sector' in education. All schools are public institutions, and have always been the object of state policy; but they do provide for rather different clienteles. What the promotion of 'freedom of choice' in schooling actually means on the ground is more subsidies for the education of the rich and less for the education of the poor. If these seem to any readers to be rather crude terms, I suggest they find out what is actually going on in schools today.

Given that it was invited to 'advise' a government bent on that kind of policy in education, what did the TEC do?

The Report

In the first place, it did what it had to: produced a concrete, costed version of the programme the Government was after. The main features of this are (a) overall stability in funding — total grants of $1,605 m in 1981, $1,677 m in 1984; (b) growth in the TAFE sector, as already noted; (c) reconstruction in the Advanced Education sector, shifting away from teacher training and towards management and technologies. (This involved proposals for amalgamations involving CAEs which used to be teachers' colleges, an idea which has been taken up energetically by the Razor Gang.).

It is obvious that the universities are in a bit of a policy backwater. The main action is in the other two sectors. Overall funds for universities are held roughly level, meaning a steady squeeze in most situations. The Report offers nothing about the main structural problem of the university sector, the fact that a number of the new universities were caught short by the squeeze at a size well below what was intended.

Here too, however, the pressure of conservative policy can be felt. There is supposed to be a shift to

research activity in the universities (that is what distinguishes them from the CAEs, you see), and the new conservative line on research funding is to give more of it in bigger lumps to fewer researchers. This is supposed to encourage 'excellence'. That is hogwash; what it actually encourages is elitism. However, the Universities Council and the TEC have bought the argument and are now in the business of increasing the levels of competition among academics for research funds.

On another issue the TEC report conforms to the Fraser style. Everyone is aware of the substantial increases in the number of women going to matriculation in the schools, and also entering higher education. Given our sexual division of labour, where women are landed with the bulk of child-care, that creates a pressing need for good child care facilities at the institutions. The TAFE Council (2 women, 7 men) pointed out that the lack of facilities meant unequal opportunity. The Advanced Education Council (1 woman, 8 men) and the Universities Council (1 woman, 8 men) ignored the issue. The T.E.C. (1 woman, 8 men)

> *doubts whether expenditures on child care centres can be regarded as strictly educational ones. The Commission therefore does not propose to recommend capital or recurrent assistance for child care centres. Groups associated with tertiary education institutions which are seeking assistance for child care facilities should apply to the Office of Child Care. (p.201)*

Or, in plain language, 'get lost!' I suppose there are not many mothers of small children who are trying to become accountants, executives, mining engineers or metallurgists.

On other matters the Report shows the ambivalences of federal policy. The attempt to trim the state, in Australia to trim the central state, repeatedly runs up against the need for tighter central control to impose policy. In the case of academic salaries, the latter logic has prevailed and the Commonwealth has imposed conformity on the institutions to enforce 'the Government's policy of wage restraint'.

That was outside the TEC's control; but it seems that a push towards uniformity is part of the TEC's basic logic. Certainly it decided against preparing State-by-State proposals 'because of the national character of the matters dealt with in this volume' (p.6). Its thinking runs to 'sectors', for the most part, rather than regions, States, or institutions. So it is *de facto* involved in a process of centralizing the administrative and financial control of higher education. The study-leave issue, where a limit of 7% of staff time has now been successfully imposed on the universities, is a notable example.

And in other respects again, it would seem that the TEC is pursuing a line antagonistic to the Government's. It does, however mildly, acknowledge that the 'steady state' of the last five years or so has actually meant a reduction in available funds and a run-down of plant and quality of work (*cf* p.71). It has met the political pressure for 'accountability' by setting up a programme of 'Evaluation Studies' in what one suspects is about the most useful way this highly tendentious business can be done at all, that is, making them mostly self-help exercises for the institutions. It has refused to be pushed into being a display piece for the Government's new love-affair with conservative migrant groups, funding 'community languages' as it was required to, but only at $1 m. It recommended against increased funding of private-sector teachers' colleges. Most interestingly of all, it has almost entirely kept out of the business, which it could have gone into much more heavily, of trying to influence what the universities should teach. It is sceptical about 'manpower planning' (*when* will they learn that over one-third of the Australian workforce are women?), and is plainly leaving the universities to work out their own salvation on this score.

The Government has no such restraint. Its response — in the form first of the Razor Gang cuts in April '81, and then in the formal guidelines to the TEC specifying funding for 1982-84 — has been usefully surveyed by Grant Harman in the last issue of *Vestes*. I would agree with his conclusion, except that I do not see this as a 'subtle' attack on liberal education, but a quite blunt one; and also that the drift of Government policy is not to turn *all* higher education into vocational preparation. The drift is rather to turn *mass* education in a vocational (or apparently vocational) direction; and to divide it more sharply from the education of the elites.

What the universities are to do in the face of all this is still unsettled. There are forces in the universities that want to run ahead of Liberal policy and embrace capital, either for the direct cash gains (which are often not what is imagined, as businessmen tend to drive hard bargains), or to prove to our masters how good we are in the hope that that will soften their hearts. What has gone before should suggest how feeble that hope is. I think we ought to do better.