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THE CULTURE WARS IN THE SCHOOLS



LAST YEAR, Prime Minister Howard suggested that government schools might be too politically correct and that this left-wing bias in the curriculum is one of the reasons why parents are turning to independent schools. Is it true—has the education system become more about indoctrination instead of education?

Judged by the impact of the culture wars over the last twenty years or so, the answer is Yes. Instead of education being committed to academic standards, the focus is on promoting an ideologically driven, politically correct view of the world. Left-wing academics, teacher unions and sympathetic governments have all conspired to use the education system to attack the so-called capitalist system and to indoctrinate students with their left-wing ideology.

A basic tenet of this left-wing approach, even though communism has clearly failed, is that society can still be changed by taking “the long march through institutions” like the church, the family and, in particular, the education system. As noted by Bill Hannan, a one-time senior bureaucrat in the Victorian Education Department and the person largely responsible for the failed national curriculum introduced by the Keating federal government: “We don’t have to wait for society to change before education can change. Education is part of society. By changing it, we help to change society.”

The most recent example of this political bias is an editorial in the Australian Association for Teachers of English journal *English in Australia* (Number 141). The editor, Wayne Sawyer, argues that because young voters (ex-students) supported the re-election of the Howard government, it is obvious that English teachers had failed in their job to teach social-critical literacy. The fact that young voters voted the wrong way, according to Sawyer, is proof that they are not thinking clearly or ethically and teachers must redouble their efforts to ensure that young people think the way the teachers want.

In schools, the impact of the culture wars has been

profound. Subjects like history and civics are rewritten to enforce a politically correct, black-armband view, and feminists and left-wing advocates of the gender agenda argue for the rights of women, gays, lesbians and transgender people. Across Australian schools, in areas like multiculturalism, the environment and peace studies, students are indoctrinated and teachers define their role as new-age class warriors.

One of the most strident and influential ways that the

Left has sought to control the hearts and minds of students is through the imposition of political correctness. The expression first gained prominence on

American university campuses around 1990 when the Left fought to take over universities, and conservative academics were attacked and vilified for daring to question the thought police of the Left. The Random House *Webster’s College Dictionary* defined political correctness as: “marked by or adhering to a typically progressive orthodoxy on issues involving especially race, gender, sexual affinity or ecology”.

Education in Australia, at both school and university levels, has also been a victim of the politically correct orthodoxy. Since the early 1990s traditional approaches to learning have been attacked as obsolete, patriarchal and bourgeois. Professor Ross Fitzgerald, noting the impact of political correctness on our universities, said it “was suppressing research, hijacking free speech and being enforced in a dangerously virulent way”.

As anyone familiar with the culture wars will know, universities no longer pretend that education should be about what Matthew Arnold termed the “best that has been thought and said”. The English Department at the University of Melbourne provides an example. Subjects like literature disappear, replaced by cultural studies as students are forced to choose between such offerings as: “Reading Sexuality”, “From Rock to Rave”, “Feminist Cultural Studies”, “Postcolonial Writing” and “Contemporary Culture and Everyday Life”.

Great literature was once valued for its aesthetic and

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moral value. The impact of “neo-Marxism”, “feminism”, “postmodernism” and “theories of transgression” (in particular “queer theory”) now means that such an approach is considered “Eurocentric”, “homophobic” and “patriarchal”. So students at the University of Melbourne spend their time “reading diverse cultural forms (the family home, the amusement park) and practices (shopping, fandom)” and learning how “pop-feminist and post-feminist discourses conceptualised the relation between gender, sexuality and embodiment”.

Not only has the definition of what are considered worthwhile texts for study (such as Shakespeare, Patrick White, Joseph Conrad and Jane Austen) been exploded to include “the fashion industry, daytime television, cyber-feminism, plastic surgery”, but concepts like truth and beauty are replaced by “concepts such as authenticity, identity, historical revisionism, mimicry and hybridity”. As Pierre Ryckmans has noted:

A true university is (and has always been) anchored in values. Deprived of this holding ground, it can only drift at the caprice of all the winds and currents of fashion, and, in the end, is doomed to founder in the shallows of farce and incoherence.

Teachers who have been taught in tertiary faculties steeped in political correctness have had, and are having, a significant impact on schools. As a result, instead of receiving an objective and balanced education, students are given a one-sided view on issues like peace studies, history, multiculturalism, the environment, feminism and the class war.

As evident by its response to Australia’s involvement in the Iraq war, the Australian Education Union (AEU) is a strong advocate of political correctness. At the outset of the war, when Australian defence personnel were about to place their lives at risk, the AEU released a media statement entitled “Educators Oppose Howard’s War”. The union argues that Australia’s involvement represents an “illegal invasion of Iraq”, and that, as a result of the war, “loss of life and devastation are likely to be horrific”.

Notwithstanding the counter-argument that years had been wasted trying to get Saddam Hussein to abide by UN resolutions, the union also argues that “disarmament through continued weapons inspection and negotiation” is the only alternative. Mirroring the Australian Labor Party’s policy, the union further argues “Bring our Australian troops home” and suggests that teachers should “take action in your workplace and community” and “support students who take an anti-war stance”.

At no stage did the union admit there might be any validity in the opposing viewpoint about Saddam Hussein or that there might be any justification for military action. In line with the politically correct interpre-

tation of international diplomacy, the union also argued that the only alternative to aggression and hostility is “the avoidance of conflict and resolution of problems by peaceful means”.

Forgotten is that violence might be justifiable as an action of last resort and that, in the eyes of many parents, teacher unions should not seek to impose their political views on students and schools. Parents could be forgiven for thinking that, instead of mounting public campaigns on sensitive political issues, teacher unions might concentrate more on improving teaching and learning in our classrooms.

SINCE THE RELEASE of “Studies of Society and Environment—a Curriculum Profile for Australian Schools” (SOSE), how students are taught Australian history and politics has also become a battleground. As noted by Professor Geoffrey Blainey, many historians and textbooks promote a “black armband” view of Australia’s past and world affairs. Australian history is being interpreted in a particularly negative way; instead of celebrating what we have achieved as a nation, students are taught to feel guilty about the sins of the past. Instead of trying to understand past events by placing them in their historical context, revisionist historians take the high moral ground and interpret the past in the light of what is now considered politically correct.

The result, as shown by the national SOSE curriculum, is that the European settlement of Australia is described as an invasion and Australia’s Anglo-Celtic heritage is either marginalised or ignored. Whereas students are asked to “Describe some of the achievements of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people (for example, Pat O’Shane, Eddie Mabo)” the SOSE document fails to make any mention of Anglo-Celtic figures, such as Captain Cook, Matthew Flinders, Edmund Barton or Sir Robert Menzies, who have made Australia what it is today. In the national curriculum document the culture and history of Australia’s Indigenous people are portrayed as heroic and there is little, if any, recognition that Aboriginal culture might be misogynist or dysfunctional.

Geography has also been a key battleground in the Left’s attempts to impose its worldview on Australian students. Whereas geography once focused primarily on things like topography and different forms of land use, political correctness, in the words of a draft version of the Queensland school curriculum, replaces Geography with what is called “Place and Space” and argues that the study should: “emphasise active participation and stewardship by applying the values of democratic process, social justice, ecological and economic sustainability and peace”.

As with much of the new orthodoxy, the focus is no

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longer on teaching knowledge and understanding associated with established subjects; instead it is on transmitting values, dispositions and beliefs associated with what the Left considers environmentally correct. The national curriculum SOSE statement urges students to:

participate as active and informed citizens in a democratic society and within a global community. Students deal with significant matters such as ethics, social justice and ecologically sustainable development and are actively involved in gaining knowledge and making decisions and choices.

The “Curriculum Perspectives” listed to inform how Geography, and SOSE in general, should be taught also stress the usual PC suspects, including: Gender perspectives, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, Multicultural perspectives, Global perspectives and Futures perspectives.

The national curriculum SOSE document is not the only example of politically correct geography. As outlined by Dr Stephen Codrington (one-time Principal of St Paul’s Grammar and a member of the New South Wales Geography Syllabus Committee) changes to the New South Wales geography syllabus during the early 1990s were also very much influenced by the new orthodoxy. The government-mandated curriculum embraced what Codrington described as “social engineering perspectives”, including: Aboriginal education, non-sexist education, multicultural education and environmental education. Codrington explains:

One of the aims of the Syllabus Committee in developing the new syllabus was to rid Geography teaching in New South Wales of the white, male, Anglo-middle-class values which some claim have been privileged in education for too long.

Codrington recounts a meeting of the Syllabus Committee where a departmental officer presented a paper deconstructing the folk tale “The Three Little Pigs”. The paper was presented as an example of how traditional Eurocentric stories marginalise particular groups in society and unfairly advance the power of others. To quote from the discussion paper:

This folk tale ... contains elements of a worldview which the British authorities, if not all the convicts, brought to Australia in 1788. The story assumes a society with private property and individualised labour. It applauds discipline and hard work and the

solid stone or brick houses of Europe, it places non-material cultural pursuits second to material, and its primary motivation comes from fear of nature, or wilderness, in the form of a wolf. It could not be an Aboriginal folk tale or Dreaming story.

Those committed to political correctness argue that the mainstream Anglo-Celtic cultural tradition (represented by folk tales like “The Three Little Pigs”) is inequitable, socially unjust and biased in that it fails to properly recognise and value the culture of so-called oppressed groups like Indigenous Australians, women and recently arrived migrants. Ignored is that “discipline and hard work” might be worthwhile attributes to promote in young children.

A more recent example of a politically correct curriculum is the Queensland SOSE document that became the centre of public debate after its release in early 2000. The strength of the public outcry forced the Director-General of Education to establish a review committee to investigate the complaints. The document was attacked for its uncritical left-wing view of studies of society and environment and the fact that it adopted the worst excesses of an outcomes-based approach to curriculum. The key values outlined in the SOSE document include: democratic processes, social justice, ecological and economic sustainability, and peace. Such values are interpreted from a left-

wing, new-age perspective. Students are taught:

- that “knowledge is always tentative”,
- that they should “deconstruct dominant views of society” and “critique the socially constructed elements of text”,
- “how privilege and marginalisation are created and sustained in society”, and
- how “the consumer of a text is positioned” and to consider “the possibility of who may have been marginalised by authors”.

Whereas education was once based on the assumption that there are some absolutes (truth telling, equal justice for all, and the need for tolerance and compassion), in the brave new world of the Queensland curriculum students are told that everything is “tentative” and “shifting” and that the purpose of education is to criticise mainstream society in terms of what has become the new trinity of gender, ethnicity and class. Students are told they must “develop the ability to critically analyse social structures that unjustly disadvantage some individuals or groups”. Forget that Australia championed the eight-hour day, the conciliation and arbitration system, and votes for women.

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Similar to the much-maligned national curriculum, throughout much of the Queensland document, students are also called upon to study Australia's Indigenous culture, while the mainstream Anglo-Celtic tradition is either ignored or belittled. One searches in vain for a coherent treatment of Australian history or a recognition that there is much that we have achieved since European settlement of which we should be proud.

The document also asks students to acknowledge and celebrate cultural diversity without recognising that much of Australia's economic, political and legal stability relies on a European tradition steeped in the Judeo-Christian ethic. A commitment to human rights, the rule of law and tolerance and respect for others does not arise intuitively or by accident. Australian society has proved to be such a successful experiment because of the presence of those very values grounded in Western civilisation that can be traced back thousands of years via England and Europe to ancient Rome, Greece and Israel.

The Queensland document is far from unusual. All the state and territory SOSE-related curriculum documents in early 2003 adopted much the same left-wing view. The emphasis is on the disadvantaged, and students are expected to challenge political and social structures, in particular in the areas of global resources, human rights and the environment.

While a certain amount of critical inquiry is a good thing, one wonders whether students will ever learn about the way in which Western capitalism and scientific breakthroughs in medical science and food technology have saved millions of the world's poor over the last twenty to thirty years. One also wonders whether students will be taught that ideals such as social justice, human rights and equal rights are the products of the Judeo-Christian, Western tradition so much derided and condemned by the politically correct.

ONE OF THE MORE recent manifestations of the Left's attack on traditional values and the school system can be found in its advocacy of gender politics (in particular, gay, lesbian and transgender studies) and feminism. Many parents are concerned that in the rush to educate students about the benefits of gay, lesbian and transgender lifestyles, we rob them of their youth and the chance to lead what, in most cases, is a healthier, more socially acceptable way of life.

Most parents send their children to school to become educated, to mix with others of their own age and to better understand the balance between rights and responsibilities. Very few parents would regard it as the role of schools to teach children about the positive aspects of gay, lesbian and transgender sex lifestyles. But such is the world of the politically correct.

One of the committees associated with the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory is the Standing Committee on Health. In one of its most recent reports, entitled "Looking at the Health of School Age Children in the ACT", the argument is put that, as children will be sexually active, more needs to be done to teach them about "safe sex".

Forget about abstinence or the fact that many parents would argue that it is the family's role to deal with such matters. Not only does the report argue for condom-vending machines in schools, but also that schools should stop treating heterosexuality as the norm and do more to teach students about gay, lesbian and transgender sex. In fact, the report goes as far as recommending to all schools (government, independent and Catholic) that they make use of a youth organisation that sees as one of its roles: "To develop a caring, informative, non-discriminatory environment that is conducive to the exploration of sexuality by GLBT [gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender] young people and peer facilitators."

The Australian Education Union is also a strong advocate of the gender agenda. While few would dispute the union's right to defend its members against unfair treatment, a problem arises when the union seeks to influence what is taught in the classroom. Under the heading "Sex Education", the union argues that comprehensive sex education should be available to all primary, secondary and tertiary students. Parents might accept that students, when ready, should be allowed to learn about sexual matters in a balanced and objective way, but the teacher union goes further. It argues that gays, lesbians and transgender individuals have a right to teach sex education: "The sexual orientation and/or gender preferred identity of individual teachers should not be a factor in determining which teachers are able to teach sex, health or human biology education."

The union also argues that any treatment of sexual matters should be "positive in its approach" and that school curricula should "enhance understanding and acceptance of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people". Forgotten is that many parents would consider the sexual practices of gays, lesbians and transgender individuals decidedly unnatural and that such groups have a greater exposure to sexually transmitted diseases. And unlike the AEU, which criticises society for assuming that heterosexual sex and relationships are normal and natural, most parents would prefer their children to form a relationship with somebody of the opposite sex.

In Australia, England and the USA, among the most strident advocates of political correctness have been English teachers' associations. The Australian Association for the Teachers of English (AATE) and its various state affiliates have, along with the AEU, been strong

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advocates of the gender agenda. This is from the Victorian Association for the Teaching of English journal, *Idiom*:

contemporary Australian society is essentially undemocratic. Members of our society are continuously discriminated against based on ethnicity, religion, sexuality and perhaps most obviously, gender. The hegemony of our culture has a tendency to perpetuate surreptitiously these forms of discrimination.

Since the late 1990s, national and state English teachers' conferences as well as official publications like *English in Australia* and *Idiom* have advocated a sexually inclusive, politically correct approach to the English classroom. Issue number 112 of the journal *English in Australia* (1995) is titled "Gender and Sexuality" and includes articles such as: "Boys and Literacy: Exploring the Construction of Hegemonic Masculinities", "Dangerous Lessons: Sexuality Issues in the English Classroom" and "Only Your Labels Split Me: Interweaving Ethnicity and Sexuality in English Studies".

While most parents are happy for their children to develop a traditional sense of what it means to be male or female, English teachers are told that they must help students recognise "the various ways in which gender categories are tied to an oppressive binary structure for organising the social and cultural practices of adolescent boys and girls".

Central to the ideology is a belief that Australian society is patriarchal and bourgeois—women and girls are the victims of a male-dominated conspiracy which has entrenched the power of men and which guarantees their success. That men and boys have ruled for so long, in part, is because of what the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci called hegemony.

Gramsci's theory is that unequal power relations within society occur because most people take them for granted so they appear natural. Thus, for the feminist, even though boys and girls might be happy with their respective roles, this is only because of what is termed false consciousness. The role of the feminist academic and teacher is to convince students that nothing about society or the way we learn and live is impartial or neutral. Gender is not biologically determined, instead it is a social construct and, as a result, students can be taught, or programmed, to act differently. As stated in the "Gender Equity" section of the South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability webpage (under the heading "Social Construction"):

Running through all the issues brought to light in investigating gender as a societal construct is the categorisation of the norm and the other with the other not being up to standard. Examples include the male/female, reason/emotion, sciences/humanities, public/private and paid/unpaid work splits. This persistent ordering into dichotomies shores up the norm in the dominant power relation to the other and is often not explicitly examined in curriculum, teaching and learning. Curriculum can continue to express these power relations or take part in their deconstruction and reconstruction.

The belief is that existing gender roles reflect inequitable and unjust "dominant power relation(s)" and that education must be directed at the "deconstruction and reconstruction" of such roles. While some in society might be happy with the expectation that boys and girls celebrate difference in a positive and beneficial way, those in control of the gender agenda paint a bleak picture—those supporting "heterosexuality as a norm" need to be re-educated and students must be taught to question traditional gender roles.

As a result, traditional literature like *Romeo and Juliet* is attacked for promoting heterosexual love, and books like *The Magic Faraway Tree* and traditional fairytales like "Jack and the Beanstalk" are attacked for presenting boys as masculine and physically assertive. The author of a primary classroom unit titled "Fracturing Fairytales" says:

This unit of work was written to provide teachers with strategies to challenge stereotyping and sexist language in traditional literature ... Fairytales provide common and popular classroom teaching activities. However, as these present powerful images of gender-specific roles, and, in particular, negative female roles, the attitudes, beliefs and values inherent in them need to be critically examined and challenged.

The English classroom was once a place where students could learn to read, write and study worthwhile literature, but things have changed:

the English classroom is conceptualised as a socio-political site where alternative reading positions can be made available to students outside of an oppressive male-female dualistic hierarchy—outside of an oppressive phallogocentric signifying system for making meaning.

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How literature is presented in the classroom is not the only casualty of the gender agenda. Language teaching has also suffered. According to Pam Gilbert, who taught at James Cook University, language is “the product of power and struggles for power”. Teachers, instead of teaching grammar, spelling and punctuation, should expose the way the English language has been “named, defined and dominated by masculinist discourses and institutions”. Gilbert argues that young children in the English classroom must be taught to read “against the grain” and to recognise that traditional approaches to language and literature teaching rely on what she terms “phallus-dominated heterosexuality and female dependence”. She also argues that:

many feminists would see heterosexual love, marriage and childbearing as only one set of options open to women, and would want to question and alter traditional patterns of male dominated heterosexual relationships.

Further evidence of the way in which the feminist-inspired gender agenda has been forced on Australian schools is found in the federally funded project titled “Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools”; in particular, the two documents headed “Framework for Action on Gender Equity in Schooling” and “Perspectives on Gender Equity in Schooling” and the papers presented at the Promoting Gender Equity Conference, February 1995.

While nodding in the direction of problems faced by boys and men, the overwhelming impression on reading these “gender equity” materials is that girls are unjustly discriminated against and that boys and men are the main part of the problem. Again and again, boys are told that they are “misogynist”, “insensitive” and “violent”, and that if they only changed and become sensitive new-age guys then all would be solved. As with much of political correctness the assumption appears to be that equality means being the same; forgotten is that true equality can also acknowledge and respect difference.

BOYS’ SELF-CONCEPT and beliefs about what it means to be male are not the only areas that have suffered because of the feminist agenda. Of equal concern are the figures related to academic success at school, in particular low levels of literacy and poor Year 12 results, and the increasing recognition that the way classrooms now operate works against boys’ preferred learning styles.

Such was the groundswell of opinion in favour of redressing the imbalance against boys in education that a Senate inquiry into the education of boys was established in March 2000. The committee’s report, in October 2002, acknowledges the fact that previous

attempts to implement the gender agenda were misdirected and lacking in balance. The report states:

Girls’ education strategies and programs have, as a by-product of their original purpose, assisted girls through the social and economic changes of the last 20 years. In comparison, over this period, little has been done to help boys understand and negotiate the same changes ... the focus of the current approach embodied in *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* is too narrow, and [the Committee] recommends that it be recast, focusing on positive values and goals, to provide for distinct but complementary education strategies for boys and girls.

Further evidence that the gender debate is now focusing more on boys’ education can be found in the work of the University of Western Sydney’s Men’s Health Information and Resource Centre. The Centre provides a series of papers written by men that seek answers to questions like youth suicide, underachievement at school and the place of fathers in a post-feminist world.

“Making it OK to be Male” (see menshealth.uws.edu.au/publications.html) is one paper that should be compulsory reading for anyone wanting to learn about the problems caused by the way men have been emasculated by the feminist agenda. For too long, especially at school, boys and men have been told that they are part of the problem, not part of the solution. Instead of celebrating masculinity, men are portrayed as misogynist, violent and emotionally crippled.

This deficit view of what it means to be male is based on the assumption that men need to become “more ‘feminine’ in order to be whole”. The result, according to academics like Peter West and John Macdonald, is that many boys now lack self-esteem and a “positive sense of self”.

The alternative to a deficit approach to masculinity, in the words of “Making it OK to be Male”, is to “create a culture which does not run away from the darker side of men but which validates and honours men ... a culture where men and boys and older men don’t feel they have to apologise for being male”. Crucial to this is to read to boys traditional fairytales and legends, such as “Jack and the Beanstalk”, Robin Hood, Norse legends and the tales of Greek heroes such as Odysseus, in order that boys understand and value those personal qualities that are distinctively male.

*Kevin Donnelly, a former chief of staff to federal Employment Minister Kevin Andrews, is author of **Why Our Schools are Failing** (Duffy & Snellgrove, 2004), from which some of this article is drawn.*