Owing to the shortage of space caused by our “Left Reading” feature, ALR’s letters page has had to be held over until the next issue.

We welcome your letters for the next issue, due out in August. As a general rule, letters should be no longer than 250 words and, preferably, should be typewritten. ALR reserves the right to edit letters down to this length.

Authors’ addresses and a contact phone number should be included although, naturally, they will not be printed.

The deadline for letters for the next issue is Monday, 27 July.

Not enough, any disputes relating to contracts are subject to the provisions of the Industrial (Commercial Practices) Act and potential fines of $250,000.

— Howard Guille.

Educating Queensland

While Joh Bjelke-Petersen has been trying to save face at the federal level, his lieutenants in Queensland have been quietly but persistently getting on with the job. On April Fools Day, Education Minister Lin Powell tabled in the state parliament a series of proposals to amend the Education Act. Under these proposals, the 1964 Education Act would have the following enabling clause added to its title: “to provide the means whereby the State may exercise more effectively its plenary powers in the area of Education”.

What this means, in effect, is that if these proposals are passed and the Act amended, then the existing bodies such as the Boards of Teacher Education, Advanced Education and Secondary School Studies will be abolished and replaced by an amalgamated body to be known as the Council of Accredited Courses in Post-Compulsory Education. This is to consist of fourteen (14) persons, all of whom are to be appointed on the recommendation of the Minister. At the time of writing the identity of these persons is unknown.

There will also be a new body called the Council of Non-Government Education (function and personnel unknown) and another called the Council for Education for Economic Development (function and personnel unknown). President of the Queensland Teachers Union (QTU),
Mary Kelly, has said that these sweeping changes “could mean increased political interference in areas such as curriculum in schools and colleges, teacher registration, college budgets and tertiary entrance”.

Under present arrangements, all of these areas are dealt with by three independent boards. In the future, this independence is likely to disappear and the Education Minister will have the capacity for direct supervision and control of what is taught, how it is taught, and who teaches it—even to the extent that he will be able to appoint the unions’ representative to the new council. This Course Accreditation Council will, in turn, have no real powers and will act in a largely advisory capacity to the Minister.

The vagueness concerning the actual composition of the various boards is compounded by mysteries concerning the criteria for membership of them. At present, for example, the Board of Secondary School Studies has 22 members, at least eight of whom must be teachers. The Queensland Teachers Union has two direct nominees and the Queensland Association of Teachers in Independent Schools (QATIS) has one nominee. University Senates are also entitled to nominate their own representatives. The new Course Accreditation Council will have a reduced membership and no guaranteed bona fide union representation as the bill proposes now a person “primarily involved with a union of employees”. As Lyn Taylor of the QTU put it, “Which union and how ‘primarily involved with’ are defined is apparently a matter for the Minister’s discretion”.

On the Non-State Education Advisory Council, there will be eleven persons, seven of whom are “involved with non-State education” and two of whom are “involved in community activities”. Unions will have no representation on this body and all members will be appointed on the recommendation of the Minister.

The Education for Economic Development Council will consist of 16 persons, again on ministerial recommendation, without guaranteed union representation, but with representation from Vince Lester's Department of Employment and Industrial Affairs, source of that other contemporary piece of anti-democratic legislation on strikes.

There are also changes to the wording of sections of the Act dealing with Technical and Further Education (TAFE) which, according to Lyn Taylor of the QTU, may point towards a strategy for the privatisation of TAFE or parts of it. When this is combined with the Bond University, we can be fairly sure that the structure of education in Queensland is being prepared for a major political and economic overhaul in tune with strategies of privatisation and the search for “economic development”.

It is clear that these amendments to the Act are more about power and preparing the ground for such strategies than they are about making the administration more efficient and streamlined. Under this new system, for example, Lin Powell would have no more worries about the recurrence of old disputes over courses like MAGOS and SEMP, nor about sex education, AIDS education, creationism or anything else. This is for the simple reason that there will be no institutional and independent mechanism through which these disputes could arise. Crucial areas concerning cultural, educational, moral and political formation in secondary and tertiary sectors will be placed directly in the hand of the Minister's appointed bodies without recourse to any independent assessment or professional scrutiny.

The progressive Defence of Education Standards Coalition (DOES) has also predicted that the “changed structures could result in political interference in areas such as which course will be taught in school and colleges and which people could be registered to teach”. Commenting on this, Mary Kelly has added that “Standards will fall if politicians and their hand-chosen mouthpieces are permitted to usurp professional representatives from the education community in these decisions”.

The QTU, QATIS, DOES and many Parents and Citizens Associations have protested strongly at Powell's proposed amendments. There has been a picket of state parliament and a meeting with the Minister to make clear the level of professional and community opposition to his plans. His one concession to date has been to clarify that it was never his intention to exercise his new jurisdiction over private schools!

As in the sphere of industrial relations, the Queensland government is now apparently well on its way to establishing unmediated political power in the strategic field of education. Given the normal practices and procedures of the Queensland parliament, the Bill is likely to be passed unless, through concerted opposition, Powell can be pressurised by unions, community groups and professional educators into dropping the proposals.

— Colin Mercer.