The myth of the mainstream

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In May 1982, the Commonwealth Department of Education published a paper entitled "Towards a National Language Policy" to stimulate debate on language policy and to call attention to the "pressing needs for research and surveys on language use and language learning in Australia". The paper proposed "that the time is right for the development of a coherent and co-ordinated policy on languages in Australia" and that to achieve such a policy "changes may have to be made to the education system".

The fundamental issues which the paper poses are those considered in the Australian Council on Population and Ethnic Affairs report, "Multiculturalism for All Australians: Our developing nationhood", which also appeared in May of this year. Of these, the most important is clearly that concerning Australian identity, towards which the attitude of the Commonwealth Department of Education paper is that expressed in the notion of "the mainstream culture", of which English is accepted as the vehicle and as the mother tongue of those of Anglo-Celtic origin.

There is nothing contentious, of course, in the claim that English is the mother tongue of those of English origin, but there are many varieties of English, of which Australian English, with its own sub-varieties, and what for brevity's sake may be called Standard English are only two. Standard English, from which Australian English is commonly judged to diverge and in doing so to gain its Australian character, is not the mother tongue of the English. The language of Newcastle-on-Tyne, for example, shows a far greater divergence from Standard English than does Australian English, as also does the English of many other regions of the United Kingdom. For most people in the United Kingdom, Standard English is a lingua franca, a second language which proves as difficult for native English speakers to acquire, irrespective of whether they are natives of England or Australia, as French or German.

Attention to the varieties of language, which is frequently avoided by referring to standard forms, emphasises that many Australian immigrants did and do speak a
patois/dialect which embodies a culture quite distinct from that of any standard form. A national language policy, therefore, needs to have special regard to the mother tongue, where this is patois, and to the relationship of this to any regard for the standard form. Policy decisions in this area are necessarily decisions as to the worth of the culture which a language transmits and the Commonwealth Department of Education paper appears surprisingly insensitive to this in accepting that the mother tongue of those of Celtic origin is English.

That English is the Celtic mother tongue is not perhaps as provocative an assumption in Australia as it would be in the United Kingdom, where there is a long and bitter history of struggle against the repression of Celtic languages and culture. It is, however, an assumption that those, especially the Irish, who were transported to or who migrated to Australia in consequence of English subjugation and who contributed significantly to the formation of the present identity and culture of Australia, had surrendered to the repression of their cultural heritage on their arrival in Australia. The historical situation seems rather to have been that the English colony showed no more respect than the "mother country" for Celtic culture and the necessity for Celtic languages to the transmission of that culture "from generation to generation".

This particular instance of neglect calls attention to the need not simply to maintain but actively to promote languages which are the means of access to the culture of origin and hence to restore to Australian people their cultural heritage. It is a major oversight of the Commonwealth Department of Education paper that it fails to address itself to the establishment of an inalienable right to cultural inheritance. This right must surely be the foundation stone of any national language policy in a multicultural society.

The extent to which the right of cultural inheritance can be exercised will depend upon the facilities made available to that end and hence upon the priorities which govern the disbursement of public funds in this area. It is because this is so that access to language becomes a matter of policy. Language policy in Australia, it seems to be conceded, will be multiculturalist, thereby reflecting the growing acceptance of the nature of Australian society. Consequently it becomes imperative to call into question the notion of "the mainstream culture" which informs the Commonwealth Department of Education's discussion paper and that for reasons other than its disregard of Celtic claims to consideration.

**Multiculturalism**

While a multiculturalist view of the Australian identity does not deny the importance of the English contribution, it must surely define the mainstream of Australian life as the expression of the interaction of many cultures, each of which is essential in that without it Australian life would not be as it is. It is this interaction that gives our way of life its Australian identity. The argument for this view is not that this interaction should take place but that it unavoidably does so and that by being acknowledged and welcomed it can become of still greater benefit in sharpening and enriching the perception of what it means to be Australian.

It is believed in some quarters that such a perception implies a passive acceptance of Australian life as it is. Multiculturalism, however, is not inconsistent with the pursuit of cultural change and does not require us, for instance, simply to accept chauvinism, racism, sexism and the commercialisation of every nook and cranny of our way of life. What it is inconsistent with is the assumption that such things can be understood and overcome without regard to their cultural context.

What national language policy necessarily involves is planned change, facilitated by regulation of access to cultural context. As the Commonwealth Department of Education paper observes,

In so far as different cultural and subcultural groups embody in their languages different meaning potentials, [it is] the
continued use and life of these languages [which] enables the transmission of cultural values, modes of thought and world views from generation to generation.

Consequently, by making the language of one cultural group more generally accessible changes can be effected in its traditional values, thinking and outlook. The wider political implications of this prospect need to be well aired in the debate on language policy. One implication, for instance, is that in circumstances in which government is inclined to repress the language and culture of a particular "group", its own perception of its best interests may be better served by making that language and culture more susceptible to outside influence.

In many cases, one such outside influence is that of schools and universities. In the implementation of any national language policy these are certain to be seen as important means of improving access to languages. It needs to be recognised, therefore, that such institutions are not culturally neutral and that they instil, in the very learning process itself, attitudes, values and modes of thought which may well be alien to the culture of the languages they profess to teach. In such a way educational institutions may warp the transmission of cultural values. To overcome this built-in prejudice seems likely to require a revolution not simply in the organisation but in the very conception of education itself.

There is little evidence that universities, self-identified as they are with the myth of the mainstream culture, are capable of generating any meaningful response to the needs for a multicultural language policy. In some part this paralysis arises from chronic funding deficiencies, which have the effect of reducing the range and level of academic and managerial expertise and of increasing concentration upon the "mainstream". More crucially, however, it is due to the kind of prejudice implicit in the very notion of mainstream culture. This becomes more obvious when funds are restricted or reduced, since at such times it becomes essential to
define "educational" priorities, usually in the practice of management rather than in the processes of academic discussion and determination. It is as near as possible to a stone cold certainty that public funding of any multicultural language policy channelled through the universities would in the main serve only to strengthen the "mainstream", with the residue being expended upon political window-dressing as at present.

An illustration of the influence of the myth of the mainstream in schools, colleges and universities is provided by the definition of Australian as Australian-English in courses of Australian literature. Such courses do not include literature and "oral literature" produced in Australia in languages other than English. Consequently, the campaigns that have been waged to get Aust. Lit. "accepted" can be seen as a backlash against multiculturalism and as a vociferous attempt to strengthen the myth at a time when it is under attack.

Universities, upon whose graduates government relies so heavily for implementing and servicing policies, are themselves political institutions, which now see their prime responsibility as the management of public funds rather than the promotion and dissemination of knowledge. The marked shift in the balance of power within universities from academics to administrators has severely weakened the capacity of universities to participate in the formation of educational policy and to respond to the educational needs which an agreed national policy may identify.

This situation, which is replicated in all areas of social provision today, is unlikely to change until such times as there is a greater understanding on the part of government that the economic returns from education, to which the Commonwealth Department of Education paper pays much attention, are dependent upon the level of investment. In respect of the relationship of a national language policy to government economic policy, however, the paper has no comment to make. Plainly there are specific prejudices built into the management of the national economy, as there are into the management of universities, and until these are exposed and subjected to multicultural directives, there is no prospect of presently deprived "cultural and sub-cultural groups" in Australia being given a fair go. There is, of course, widespread suspicion that government talk of multiculturalism is nothing more than that. When finally a consensus has been reached on a national language policy, hopefully it will be presented to government with the injunction "Put up or shut up".

1. It may be said to have glanced at the matter in acknowledging that "access to the literary tradition appears to approach the status of a "right", but such a formulation underscores the failure to wrestle with the issue of rights.

Marx & beyond ....

In March next year, ALR proposed to organise a number of events marking the 100th anniversary of the death of Karl Marx. So far, we are planning a speaking tour and symposia, and a new format for the journal.

We believe this can be a valuable exercise for the Australian left, looking at the influence of Karl Marx and assessing problems and possibilities for the socialist movement.

If you’re interested in helping plan such a program, contact either the Melbourne or Sydney ALR collective.

— ALR Collective, PO Box A247, Sydney South 2000.