DEAR DR HARTMAN

Who Needs to Read?

Hello patients,
The topic for our consultation this month is coloured paper. It seems that when governments want to chat to the people in a democracy, they do it by writing a Green Paper. All the serfs are asked to read the paper and send their comments back to the summit of power. These comments are shredded and used for insulation under the lino in the Parliamentary Members Bar. Then the government issues a White Paper which tells the masses exactly what they were planning to do all along. This paper chase is called 'democracy in action'.

This month the federal Minister for Employment, Education and Training, John Dawkins, is due to release one of these White papers. It will be called something like The Language of Australia and its contents will shape the whole future direction of language education for adults in this country.

If you enjoyed those programs about adult literacy classes on ABC TV (which gave us some relief from Coronation Street Goes to London—alias The Eastenders), then you'll be interested in the contents of this White Paper. The trouble is, of course, that many of the people who really need to know what the Canberra mandarins are up to, won't be able to find out because they can't read the thing. I guess that's just one of the little ironies of writing policy about literacy.

Now, the world of adult literacy teaching is full of a lot of woolly-minded bolsheviks who cling to outmoded notions about 'social justice' and 'equity'. They gleaned these ideas from the reform movements of the 19th century.

These teachers studied Modern History in high school. Some fool of a teacher let them read The Rights of Man and the American Constitution, and they actually took all that poppycock about equality seriously. TAFE Colleges and the Adult Migrant Education Service (AMES) are full of teachers who actually believe that people have a right of access to reading and writing classes. Given half a chance, these misguided enthusiasts will babble on about the importance of literacy in a democracy if people are to participate and understand the issues of the day.

These literacy zealots don't just want the working class and the foreigners to be able to tick the right box on the ballot paper. They actually want the masses to be able to assess critically the complex range of information that is hurtling about in a multimedia society. These teachers have their students debating issues and ideas during their reading and writing classes instead of getting them simply to focus on phonics as they should.

Quite frankly, what these teachers really need is a month or two back with Year 7 in an overcrowded, under-resourced classroom on the outskirts of a capital city. With 30 or so teenagers from as many different countries in front of them, they might remember the fundamental importance of social control.

Thank goodness the contributors to the Green and White Papers don't need to be reminded. Social control was clearly on their minds when they foreshadowed the New Start program for the long-term unemployed. If those bludgers want to keep getting a slice of my taxes, they now have to accept "appropriate education and training". That should give them the incentive to learn how to read the application form for the dole!

When I say these youngsters have to 'accept' education and training, I should point out that it is all 'negotiated'. Some whingers are claiming that to call this process 'negotiating a contract' is Orwellian because the unemployed have no power to 'negotiate' in a situation where they are so desperate for the money.

Quite frankly, this is rot and Orwell's imagination wasn't capable of predicting the full glory of the 1990s. 'Powerless negotiation' is something the worker bees in our social hive need to get used to as quickly as possible. Once the new deregulated industrial relations climate is established, every little bee will be talking directly to the Queen.

Critics of the White Paper are going to worry their little heads that more and more literacy lessons will be offered to workers in industry who need to be 'cleverer', like the Prime Minister. At the same time, fewer and fewer literacy lessons will be offered to women with young children, people with disabilities and older people in retirement who have finally got the time to learn how to read. These critics argue that literacy provision will become more 'economically driven' rather than 'needs driven'.

Quite simply, their fears are groundless. The baby breeders don't need to read to find out how to reproduce the little economic units of the future. I'm sure their men will explain it all when they get home from their literacy lessons at work. And if anyone wants to understand the important issues of the day, they only have to turn on the TV. Ray Martin can cover Republicanism and 60 Minutes can cover Multiculturalism. Who needs to read?

Send your problems to Dr Hartman's secretary, Julie McCrossin, c/- ALR.