The Dawkins Dialectic

The Senate Standing Committee on Education, chaired by ALP Senator Terry Aulich, in its report on priorities for reform in higher education sets out to confront the policies of John Dawkins, the Minister for Employment, Education and Training. It is the first challenge to the Minister from within. How significant is it?

The Aulich Report makes a sustained attempt to reconstruct the higher education policy agenda, declaring that Dawkins in his White Paper emphasised structural issues rather than "the quality of the education which students receive - what they learn, how well they are taught, and how well they are prepared to live and work in a world of rapid change".

In education circles, saying something has no educational basis is akin, in different contexts, to saying something is patriarchal, or unAmerican. The effect is to deny its legitimacy, to place it outside the discourse. In its attempt to seize the agenda, the report ignores the current policy debates and propounds a completely different approach - an alternative policy discourse, an antithesis to Dawkins' thesis.

This is not a novel approach, but rather that old liberal-progressive educational philosophy in which 'education' is set against 'economics'. The report does not put forward an alternative perspective on the education/economy relationship, or a package of economic reforms superior to those of Dawkins. All it says is that a broad liberal education maximises education's economic contribution - a return to the simpler policy consensus supporting the 1960s expansion of public education.

Dawkins' response was predictable. With calculated fury, he moved quickly to discredit both the report and Aulich. There will be no policy synthesis out of the report's dialectical ploy. The minister said that the report is "totally useless"; it has a "very shallow basis", is "unrepresentative" and it represented "two years' wasted time on the part of some senators who obviously have too much time on their hands". He attacked Aulich for spending too much time in Canberra rather than in his home state of Tasmania and blamed Tasmania's low school retention rates on Aulich's tenure as state Education Minister. More tellingly, he said, the report failed to connect with the current debate on higher education.

The same comment was made by a less polemical Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee. They are right. Dawkins' policies are too important to ignore, even if you disagree with them. Joined by the academics' unions, the vice-chancellors also rejected the report's attacks on the standard of university teaching. The committee had few friends in the education world, or in government, although it received qualified support in the media.

So what was it that drew John Dawkins' fire? The report calls for broader education of professionals, greater cross-cultural and social awareness among graduates, better teaching, more creative and critical thinking, less rigid specialisation in courses, and more liberal access to social groups under-represented in higher education. But for all this, the report's solutions are vague.

It wants more fostering of "higher level abilities such as a capacity for critical analysis, adaptability and creativity" and more encouragement of "lateral and divergent thinking" (what? how?). It wants universities to evaluate the purposes and structure of the undergraduate curriculum across all disciplines with a view to encouraging them to broaden the nature of the educational experiences provided (which experience? how? content? structure?).

The report finds that training in the professions provides the knowledge and skills essential to professional practice - but a component of broad liberal education in a number of disciplines needs to be added.

As well as the strengths, the report also exemplifies the weaknesses in the old liberal-progressive position. It is right to criticise Dawkins for being concerned about structure without content (quality), but the content of education cannot be explained separately from structure as the report tries to do. It sidesteps too many realities. It misses the influence of commercialisation of business training, overseas student marketing and research on the swing to full fee courses and away from basic science and liberal scholarship. It also misses the remarkable growth of business studies and management education, driven by vocational pressures.

The Dawkins policies have a concrete basis in the system, in business studies and applied research. These do not fit the liberal studies paradigm and so the report ignores them. But they cannot be wished away. They need to be challenged and changed, not ignored - or the Dawkins policies will produce precisely what his critics fear.

The report cites the opinions of Professor John Goldring, who points out that economists now occupy "unparalleled positions of power" within public administration but that much economics education is "extremely narrow and does not enable students to develop wide and critical perspectives". What it does not realise is that there is a link between the narrowness of economics and the nature and effects of its power.

The education of tomorrow's public servants cannot be transformed simply by adding a periphery of sociology, literature and environmental studies units to the central core of neo-classical economics that they study. Unreconstructed, this core of economics will still attract students, and public servants, like moths to the
flame. The core discipline is what needs to be changed.

It is the same with the other professions. The report applauds professional education for its technical level while lambasting professional courses for lack of multi-disciplinary periphery. But a bit of extra culture is not enough to change our future doctors or lawyers. The real point is that in the heart of their "technical" (value-free?) training, both law and medicine usually leave out social relations. Doctors in training are never brought face-to-face with the power and greed of their profession. The report stops short of the main debate.

The report could also have talked about knowledges and how they are developing - and also the choices that we face. It could have talked about the media, the think-tanks and the private research institutes, and computer software: all producing knowledges, and often now outstripping the universities.

Instead, existing knowledge, existing professional training and the Arnoldian concept of preparing cultured individuals in formal education are all taken for granted. To the Aulich Committee, these are timeless truths. Despite the polemics against a focus on structure, it is not the content of disciplines that is in question in the report but the organisational structures in which they are taught.

When hard choices need to be made, the report's liberal progressive response is 'no comment'. Values should be thought about, and students should establish "a critical perspective on society". But the committee has no standpoint of its own from which to criticise society, and merely urges students to develop "a capacity to look at problems from a number of different perspectives". Dawkins has a viewpoint from which to judge education and that immediately makes his position stronger than that of the report.

One viewpoint from which to judge higher education is of the social groups largely excluded from it - especially working class students, and most of all Aboriginal students. The report rightly criticises the government for leaving equity policy to the institutions themselves, and says that "the opportunity to undertake higher education must be available to all Australians, whatever their individual circumstances and wherever they live, but then adds the crucial limiting phrase "subject only to the maintenance of proper academic standards".

We are back at Gough Whitlam, c.1972. The lesson of the last two decades is that, even if the economic barriers to access are lowered, traditional academic selection will still favour middle class students. Only mature age and other special entry schemes, cutting across "proper standards", enable a real shift in the socio-economic compensation of higher education.

But widespread non-traditional entry (like directly reforming the professional courses) would involve confronting the stronger universities. Despite its claims to be a reformer, the committee is actually rather timid in confronting centres of power, at least those centres of power outside Canberra. It is a genteel confrontation.

As a result its agenda is incapable of attracting popular support. The 1960s liberal-progressive promise that everything is possible if you expand access to an independent and autarkic liberal education system will no longer wash. Educational autonomy, value-free pluralism and ignoring economics no longer provide sufficient guide for a politics of radical reform of higher education - if they ever did.

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Adriatic Escape

Gargantuan statues of Stalin and Albania’s own orthodox communist mastermind, the late president Enver Hoxha, still keep watch over the capital city of Tirana. Yet Albania too is succumbing to the dynamic of change in Eastern Europe. The July refugee crisis, in which 6,000 people stormed the foreign embassies requesting political asylum, threatens to set in motion the same forces that toppled each of its orthodox communist counterparts.

For the moment, a stepped-up reform process is eroding the foundations that have kept Albania the last fortress of Stalinism in Europe. Though long overdue, the tiny country’s gradual re-entry into the real world adds a new, possibly destabilising, dimension to the larger question of a peace operation. At the same time, the many Balkan peoples’ uneasy coexistence is challenged by the Serb republic’s oppressive rule. Albania’s liberalisation might prevent domestic reform from spinning out of control. The leader who reinitiated after Hoxha’s death in 1985. The cautious approach to change adopted by Alia, Hoxha’s self-groomed heir, stems more from a sense of pragmatism than from a sincere commitment to democracy.

Albeit less frequently, Hoxha and Stalin are still extolled as the geniuses of marxism-leninism, and the Soviet leader Gorbachev is regularly castigated for completing the “political terrorism against communism” that his “spiritual father” Krushchev began. The new track, after four decades of suffocating tyranny, is justified as a “natural development of the policies of Enver Hoxha”.

Under president and party head Ramiz Alia, Tirana is embarking on the second phase of a reform, first initiated after Hoxha’s death in 1985. The cautious approach to change adopted by Alia, Hoxha’s self-groomed heir, stems more from a sense of pragmatism than from a sincere commitment to democracy.

Albania’s reform course is fragile enough in its own right. Concessions in April, and then again in July, from the party hierarchy have set Tirana on a trajectory that none of its communist counterparts were able to maintain without social upheaval and collapse.

But Albania’s situation is unique. Its long history of subordination to foreign powers, a semi-feudal culture and a massive security apparatus might prevent domestic reform from spinning out of control. The leadership, however, must walk a very fine line between party hardliners within its ranks and a growing force of disenchanted youth across the country.

Tiranaologists see the political thaw as a good will gesture toward the swelling numbers of well-informed young people who saw the events in Eastern Europe unfold on Greek, Yugoslav and Italian TV channels. International passports have been granted, penal codes and censorship laws modified, and a new ministry of justice established.

For the first time since 1967, when Albania declared itself “the world’s only atheist state”, religious practice will be tolerated. The celebration of non-secular holidays formerly carried stiff prison sentences. Churches and mosques may now open to a population that was two-thirds Muslim before the war. The faith is certain to revive itself, perhaps strengthening cultural links between Albanians and the overwhelmingly Muslim ethnic Albanians in Yugoslavia.

Progress on human rights is also under way. In a critical step forward, Albania finally ended its boycott of the Helsinki process this year. Amnesty International has heaped criticism upon the dictatorship’s treatment of political prisoners and the Greek minority. Experts estimate that between 20-30,000 political prisoners are held in the country’s five notorious prison camps.

The party has made overtures in the political realm, too, announcing a clampdown on cronyism and a limited five-year tenure for ranking officials. Party newspapers have opened a forum for restrained debate. The reform from above, however, leaves the classic one-party security state intact. No movement toward genuine political pluralism can be detected from the aged cadres. Reports from Albania say that increased police surveillance has accompanied the experiment. Albania’s own equivalent of the Romanian Securitate, the 30,000-strong Sigurimi paramilitary police, still keep a careful eye on the country’s three million inhabitants.

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At the root of Alia's Realpolitik is a decrepit economy unable to keep pace with the country's demographic explosion. The birth rate - five times that of the European average - adds 50-60,000 new workers a year to the workforce. Two years of drought have exacerbated the plight of a people with the lowest living standard on the
continents. The economy’s rigid centralisation, combined with its truncated access to foreign markets and technology, has caused exports to plummet. Industrial output is stagnating because of obsolete equipment and shortages of replacement parts for its Soviet and Chinese factories.

A push toward decentralisation and the introduction of limited market mechanisms marks a turning point in economic policy after five years of wary tinkering. The government’s prescription includes fluctuating prices for different consumer goods, smaller and independent enterprises, and greater variance in personal income. In agriculture, larger private plots may serve as ‘auxiliary farms’ to boost supplies of meat, milk and vegetables.

Measures facilitating integration into the international economy have also begun. The country desperately needs foreign markets, credit and technology in order to put its considerable raw material and energy reserves to work. As Comecon sings its swan song, economists recognise that the lek will become worthless once the country’s major trading partners convert to hard currency exchange. Albania’s participation in the Balkan conference of foreign ministers last year paved the way for new regional trade agreements. The co-operation could help offset the consequences of the outsider’s exclusion from the European Community trade bloc, as well as smooth over long-simmering border disputes.

The success of Alia’s initiatives hinges upon his ability to simultaneously appease a restless young population and the party’s hardcore stalinists. Reports of demonstrations in several cities this year confirmed suspicions that Albanians hadn’t been reacting to the turmoil in Eastern Europe as indignantly as their rulers. The party itself appears split between hardliners led by Hoxha’s widow, and pragmatists like Alia. Purges at the top have finally begun but the reverential old guard remains firmly in place.

The under-26 generation - a third of the population - has become more assertive, expressing its preference for jeans, rock and roll and trendy hair cuts over soporific party hymns and patriotic discipline. Unlike their Kosovo peers who, for decades, have spear-headed militant protest movements against the Yugoslav regime, Albanian students have no tradition of political opposition.

The nation’s youth could well be the reformers’ best ally in the short run. For Alia to graft an alliance between the two, he must delicately phase out the Stalin-Hoxha cult without sparking a coup. If the leader were to position himself as the well-intentioned reformer, like Romania’s president Ion Iliescu, he might be able to distance himself sufficiently from the former dictator to bring the youth in tow.

In the meantime, the feared Sigimuri have history on their side in keeping a lid on dissent. The country has virtually no democratic or bourgeois traditions in its 500-year servitude under foreign despotism. As a result of its choice to share its Turkish rulers’ fate almost until the end of the Ottoman Empire, Albanian socio-political culture is backward and rural, informed by centuries of tribalism.

Aspects of the Hoxha legacy are still sacred to many Albanians. The population feels itself indebted to him for securing its long-thwarted dream of national sovereignty. In its short history as a modern nation-state since 1912, Albania has been under the tutelage of, successively, Austria-Hungary, Yugoslavia, Italy, Germany, Yugoslavia again, the Soviet Union and China. The national pride of independence is a potent emotion that Alia consistently draws upon to shore up support.

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Civic Forum, the loose coalition of interests which spearheaded Czechoslovakia’s ‘Velvet Revolution’ of November 1989, won a convincing victory in June in the first free parliamentary elections since 1946. Now it has embarked on the difficult task of forming a coalition from a diverse group of opposition parties.

Despite winning a majority in both houses of the federal parliament, Civic Forum/PAV will need coalition partners to ensure the three-fifths majority necessary in the upper house to elect the president and pass legislation on constitutional issues. The Forum has ruled out forming a coalition with either the communists or the Slovak Nationalist Party which advocates Slovak separatism. Forum leaders have expressed interest in forming a coalition with the Christian Democratic Alliance, but the Alliance is divided on the issue, with the Slovak Christian Democrats opposed to, and the Czech party amenable to, coalition.

The third constituent of the Christian Democratic Alliance, the People’s Party, was rocked by the revelation on the eve of the election that its leader, Josef Bartonck, was a paid informer of the secret police for 17 years until 1988. This was no doubt a strong influence on the poorer than expected performance of the Alliance. Other factors included the strong campaign and living standards are to be expected in the short term as dramatic economic adjustments are made. The ease and pace of change is uncertain, not just in the case of structural or technical reforms but also social. There will probably be an uncertain shift in attitudes from a narrowly-focussed bureaucratic outlook to one based on a profit incentive and whose Weltanschauung actually encompasses elements of service - a creature dormant and thought extinct for the past 40 years. The exact social implications of a shift to a market-based society remain to be seen, but there is certainly no shortage of enthusiasm for the rediscovery of the long-buried business ideal in the Czech psyche; the recently formed Czechoslovak Association of Private Entrepreneurs has over 130,000 members and is booming. (The Green Party, by way of comparison, has approximately 100,000 members.)

Tensions over the direction of economic policy are threatening to destabilise the Civic Forum government. The Finance Minister Vaclav Klaus is a devout Friedmanite and favours immediate, sweeping monetarist reforms, including widespread privatisation. This approach has been sharply attacked by Deputy Prime Minister Valtr Komarek who, as a one-time Marxist economist, favours more moderate restructuring with a gradualist implementation. But whichever path in economic restructuring is taken, the landing will not be a soft one. There will be a strong decline in exports over the next decade as industry attempts to convert current non-competitive outputs (formerly exported to the USSR) to internationally competitive standards.

Komarek has calculated that this conversion process over a period of ten years may cost $14 billion at current values. Given the ideological parameters of the International Monetary Fund, it will be unlikely to lend money unless a policy of fast-track restructuring is implemented. Yet, despite the awareness of a need for profound reform, one of the hallmarks of Civic Forum has been its humane philosophy, something which may provide a buffer against the ‘short, sharp shock’ philosophy prevalent in, for instance, Poland. This comes as no surprise in a country with a history of industrialisation and progressive social policies prior to World War Two.

Policy debates aside, Civic Forum is to hold a congress in the autumn to decide its future. Never a political party, it is now an umbrella organisation representing a diverse spectrum of interests whose unity of purpose was the restoration of democracy. Campaign leader Jan Urban described it as a “rescue operation. Why bother about the colour of the lifeboat when you are drowning in the sea?” Now that goal has been achieved the continuing role of Civic Forum will need to be examined. It is certainly on the cards that it might disintegrate totally, though Havel’s own future as philosopher-president now seems assured.

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