



All Roads Lead To Canberra

Publish Date:

August 2013

This article from the [Winter 2013 edition](#) of the [IPA Review](#) is written by the Director of Education Standards Institute, Dr Kevin Donnelly.

One of the defining features of left-of-centre parties—exemplified by ALP Commonwealth government over the last six years— is the urge to centralise power and to adopt a command and control model of public policy.

As argued by Friedrich Hayek the central flaw in imposing a top down, statist model of public policy is the mistaken assumption that government can best discern what is most needed to address complex issues or to solve problems that rely on local knowledge and expertise.

According to Hayek, a basic error in such planning is that it ‘presupposes a much more complete agreement on the relative importance of different ends than actually exists, and that, in consequence, in order to be able to plan, the planning authority must impose upon the people that detailed code of values which is lacking’.



The imposition of government regulation and control also strikes at one of the fundamental tenets of democratic freedom; the belief that power resides with the individual and intermediary organisations like the family, church and school and not with the state and its assorted gangs and bureaucracies.

The Commonwealth's approach to school education provides a clear illustration of the socialist inspired desire to impose its collectivist, utopian vision of society on schools and why the government's so-called 'Better Schools' reforms, are misconceived and destined for failure.

Beginning with Kevin Rudd's Education Revolution during his first tenure as prime minister, the Commonwealth government is imposing a national curriculum, national testing, national teacher registration and certification which all forms part of the 'National Plan for School Improvement.'

The National Plan for School Improvement is especially dangerous as it represents a significant increase in external control over schools, teachers and classrooms. Based on the specious argument that it will lead to Australia performing amongst the top five nations in mathematics, science and reading tests by 2025, it imposes a host of new accountability measures on government and non-government schools. Measures include: making schools undertake annual reviews, forcing teachers to design individual learning programs for students, setting targets for school improvement and implementing a cultural-left agenda in areas like the curriculum and staffing and enrolments.

Ignored is that such requirements duplicate what many Australian schools are already compelled to do as a result of state initiatives, and that many have little, if any, educational benefit as they are time consuming, drown teachers in red tape and, in relation to individualised learning programs (aka personalised learning) are based on new-age fads instead of evidence based research.

Under the Australian Constitution, the states are responsible for school education, not the Commonwealth government. Notwithstanding that and the fact that the Commonwealth government neither employs any teachers nor manages any schools, since its election in late 2007 the federal Labor government has assumed a commanding role.

States have been sidelined because of their timidity and because of their financial dependence on the Commonwealth government. As a result, especially in relation to Catholic and independent schools, schools are being denied the ability to manage themselves and to best reflect the needs and aspirations of their communities.

While some states, such as Victoria and Western Australia, have recently demonstrated a willingness to act independently, it is also the case that the majority of state based education departments and related curriculum authorities are eager to adopt national initiatives as such authorities champion the same cultural-left, statist view of education advocated by the federal ALP.

As a result of suffering under an inflexible, bureaucratic approach, government schools have been



forced to accept off the shelf Building the Education Revolution infrastructure often unsuited to their needs. The waste is made worse by the fact that there is little, if any, evidence that the multi-billion dollar BER program has had any educational benefit.

A second example of the Commonwealth government's bent for enforcing its will on schools and classrooms is national curriculum, which is set to replace the existing eight state and territory curriculum frameworks from 2013 onwards. The flaws and weaknesses in the national curriculum are manifest.

This should come as no surprise, given many of the individuals, curriculum bodies and professional associations involved in designing the new curriculum have been in charge over the last 20 to 30 years of falling standards and failed innovations like whole language and child-centred learning.

Stronger performing education systems overseas adopt a rigorous subject centred curriculum model where the essential knowledge, understanding and skills associated with the disciplines of knowledge are centre place.

Not so in Australia where, over the last 20 years or so, schools in the majority of states and territories have been forced to adopt what is termed an outcomes-based education (OBE) model of curriculum and pedagogy.

OBE places the child centre stage, enforces a process approach to learning, defines what students should learn in terms of hundreds of vague and generalised outcome statements and embodies a cultural-left, politically correct focus in areas like multiculturalism, the environment, indigenous studies, gender and the class nature of society.

In more successful overseas systems teachers are also experts in their subject and the belief is that they should act as teachers instead of being, as in Australia, co-learners with children and forsaking their authority by acting as 'guides by the side'.

In Finland, for example, a nation whose students are amongst the top performers in the Program for International Student Assessment tests, teachers, in the words of a Finnish academic Hannu Simola, are 'pedagogically conservative' and forsake new-age fads like open classrooms and child-centred learning in favour of traditional methods like whole class teaching with the teacher at the front of the classroom.

During the period that OBE became the official orthodoxy literacy and numeracy standards across the nation's schools—despite the additional billions invested in more teachers and smaller classes—flat lined and students' results in international tests, especially amongst top performing students, have gone backwards. Additional evidence of the destructive impact of OBE are the results in the recently released Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) where Australian students are ranked 27 out of 49 countries; outperformed by the other English speaking nations, New Zealand, the United States and England.

Even though the consensus is that OBE has been an expensive and wasteful failure Australia's years 1 to 12 national curriculum embodies many of its characteristics.

Every subject at every year level, whether music, physical education, English, mathematics or science, has to be taught through a politically correct prism involving sustainability, indigenous and Asian perspectives. The curriculum also embraces what has become the code for multiculturalism, celebrating diversity and difference, on the mistaken assumption that all cultures are of equal value and worth.

As a result, the years foundation to 10 history curriculum largely ignores that reality that Australia is a Western nation and part of the Anglosphere whose history can only be fully understood in the context of the debt owed to Western Civilisation, the culture, language and political and legal institutions inherited from the British Isles and the nation's Judeo-Christian heritage. The English curriculum, in relation to literature, also undermines the debt owed to Western Civilisation by ignoring the classics associated with the Western canon and, instead, arguing that students must encounter 'the historical and contemporary literature of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' and 'the literature of Asia'.

In addition to enforcing a cultural-left perspective in history and literature, every subject in the national curriculum has to demonstrate how it will embody so-called general capabilities such as intercultural understanding, competence with new technologies and personal and social competence.

Ignored is that knowledge is inherently worthwhile and instead of being the handmaiden of whatever politically correct ideology is fashionable at the time, in the words of the American academic Israel Scheffler, it should:

'... facilitate independent evaluation of social practice... as instruments of insight and criticism, standing apart from current social conceptions and serving autonomous ideals of inquiry and truth.'

Also ignored is that capabilities are largely subject specific and cannot be taught in isolation. Literacy is best taught in English by students learning the rules of grammar, syntax, précis and reading and listening to poems, plays, novels and short stories that have something enduring to say about the human condition and that have stood the test of time.

It stands to reason that if the six states asserted their independence, instead of acquiescing to the Commonwealth's demands to enact a national curriculum and its National Plan for School Improvement, there would be a greater chance of lifting standards and providing students with a rigorous, evidence-based and academically sound curriculum.

Principally because, instead of every school across the nation being forced to implement a one size fits all, uniformly mediocre model, there would be a number of state based curriculums ensuring competition and diversity.

Proven by the success of Australia's Catholic and independent schools—schools that outperform



state controlled schools even after adjusting for students' socioeconomic background—there is an alternative to the Rudd government's statist and inflexible approach to education.

Autonomy, choice and competition in education don't just explain the success and popularity of non-government schools. It has been shown that a more market driven approach to education, as argued by the European Researcher Ludger Woessmann, is also a characteristic of stronger performing education systems.

Allowing decisions to be made as close as possible to those most affected in areas like staffing, budgets and curriculum focus, what in the Catholic system is known as subsidiarity, is more effective than schools being managed by remote bureaucrats in head office or being at the whim of short-term political expediency.

School choice, where parents are able to choose between a variety of schools, whether government or non-government, is also beneficial as there is a greater chance that schools will be held to account if they fail to provide a sound education.

Allied to the concept of autonomy and diversity in education, and essential if school choice is to be open to greater numbers of parents and their children, are vouchers and or tax credits. Instead of governments controlling how schools are funded, individual families receive a voucher for an agreed amount that they are then free to 'cash in' at whatever school they think is best for their child.

The success and popularity of school choice explains the charter school movement in the USA, the move to introduce 'Free Schools' by the Conservative government in the UK and the private school movement in places like India and Chile. While often attacked by the cultural-left, unsurprisingly given that school choice restricts the power of teacher unions, subject associations and educators, there is increasing evidence that school choice is beneficial.

There's no doubt that Australia is facing a crisis in education. There is also no doubt, based on the Commonwealth government's record to date, that standards will continue to fall and nothing will improve.