

# This Bias

## The left wing domination of Year 12 English

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**‘What?’** My student exclaimed in a manner that demanded immediate clarification. While tutoring him in the Year 12 English course (VCE), I had made a comment that inferred the existence of poets who were not of the Left, that is poets who expressed, for example, liberal, conservative, or patriotic views. My student, stunned with surprise, did not believe that such creatures existed. He neither believed that there could be such a thing as a non-Left poet nor that poetry could be used to express non-Left ideas. This was not the student’s fault. My student was very clever, hardworking, and he had writing ability, which I was very keen to develop.

However, like most students, he did not read poetry of his own volition, so all of his encounters with it had been im-

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posed by school. Consequently, he had only ever been presented with left-wing poets, such as the Australian Bruce Dawe, and he therefore reached the (understandable but mistaken) conclusion that all poets were left-wing, for example, pacifists rather than patriots. This misunderstanding is just one of the consequences of the overwhelming ideological bias favouring the politically correct Left in the English curriculum in Victorian high schools.

This bias is not confined to poetry. It permeates the entire English course, and it has done so for decades. The subtle un-stated implication of an English curriculum that consists almost exclusively of the study of books, films, plays and poems that espouse left-wing sentiments is that the only ideas worthy of display in serious art are left-wing ideas. This ideological bias also carries the subtle un-stated implication that to be intelligent and creative, in a manner that may one day produce works worthy of scholastic study, is to be left-wing.

The criteria for the selection of texts for study are published with the course text list, and presented on the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority

website. It states that the texts should ‘have literary merit and be worthy of close study’. This criterion appears innocently unbiased. Taken at face value, it could even potentially accommodate the study of an ideologically wide spectrum of texts.

However, not all the selection criteria appear ideologically neutral. The criterion that stipulates that the list of the 30 texts (from which school English departments select three or four texts for their students to study) should ‘include texts that display affirming perspectives’ is indisputably ideological. This is because what is considered to be ‘affirming’ by the members of the predominantly left-wing educational establishment is what is perceived by them to be affirming for ideologically designated groups, such as Aborigines, migrants from non-English-speaking backgrounds, asylum seekers, Irish-catholic republicans, etc. What they deem to be affirming for these groups, in practice, often becomes disconfirming for free-market liberals, conservatives, traditional Australian nationalists, Irish-protestant loyalists, etc. The implication from the Victorian English curriculum is that

these are the bad guys, those who are unworthy of the affirmation of their values.

In addition, many of the selected texts may not be all that affirming in practice for some of the students who are members of the groups nominated by the Left as in need of affirmation. Unfortunately, the heavy handed anti-racist messages in many texts, such as Garry Disher's *The Divine Wind*, can backfire, making some Asian students suddenly feel uncomfortably self-conscious, as they are transformed (by an English lesson they will probably never forget) from being just one of the gang to being an 'Asian' who is designated

much preferred by the editor. Both patriotic and anti-patriotic sentiments were eloquently expressed in the range of works in the anthology, and both patriotic and anti-patriotic sentiments are very worthy of study and appreciation.

Regrettably, the study of poetry from the First World War (a worthy choice) was rotated off the curriculum prematurely, well before it had finished the standard four-year stint. It was replaced by a collection of lyrics by the Australian singer-songwriter and left-wing political activist Paul Kelly, *Don't Start Me Talking: Lyrics 1984-2004*, which featured protest

are routinely selected according to criteria claimed to highlight quality appears to be testimony to this very human tendency.

At the beginning of the school year when I analyse the recently added contemporary Australian literature in preparation to tutor my students, the ideological themes become monotonously repetitive. They are the ideological canons of political correctness: environmentalism, feminism, anti-racism, Marxism, and pacifism. In addition, the specific issues covered in the texts are equally repetitious, being those of most interest to the politically correct Left, such as Aboriginal land

## Is ideological uniformity advantageous in a pluralist society?

as worthy of pity for apparently being a member of a persecuted minority. Many young migrants, or the children of migrants, are understandably proud of their ethnicity. Nevertheless, they often see themselves, and like to be seen, as individuals, so it can feel patronisingly disconcerting to unexpectedly find themselves ideologically categorised as belonging to groups designated as people with problems. As a private tutor, I am privileged to hear the sincerely expressed concerns of students in this regard, concerns that most students would be wary of sharing with an English teacher who is unequivocally enthusiastic about a text that reflects their ideological preferences.

It should be noted that a couple of poets who were not of the Left did temporarily sneak into the Year 12 English curriculum, like stowaways in a cargo hold. They were to be found in a collection of poetry from the First World War that had been edited by a pacifist writer, Jon Silkin, who confessed in his introduction that he felt reluctantly obliged to include in his anthology several famous movingly patriotic laments for the war dead, such as Rupert Brooke's 'The Soldier' and John McCrae's 'In Flanders Fields'. These poems appeared along with works such as the biting anti-patriotic, angry and stirring pacifist poems of Wilfred Owen, like his 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' or 'Dulce Et Decorum Est', poems

songs about Aboriginal reconciliation and other politically correct subjects. No conservative sentiments are to be found here. Kelly is a competent lyricist, but the inclusion of his works raises another issue emanating from the ideological bias in the curriculum – opportunity cost.

Year 12 English students only get to study four texts, or three, or sometimes even only two if their teacher does not cover the designated material in the designated time. Time spent studying the lyrics of Paul Kelly is time lost that could have been spent studying Rupert Brooke or Wilfred Owen or William Shakespeare. Even Paul Kelly, who would be understandably flattered by his selection, would probably admit this. But one wonders, would a lyricist of equivalent talent to Paul Kelly, but expressing the opposite views, ever be selected for Year 12 study? Is the decisive factor for being selected literary talent? (Kelly has some.) Or is it ideological conformity? (Kelly has this in abundance.)

The preference for political correctness seems to particularly stand out in the selection of contemporary Australian literature for study. The pattern could not be an accident. Although the defenders of the current education system could argue that the decisive selection criterion is quality, it has to be recognised that ideology often profoundly shapes perceptions of quality, and the fact that left-wing texts

rights and reconciliation, migrant settlement and multiculturalism, immigration and asylum seekers, and so on.

Along with Paul Kelly's lyrics, one can currently observe these ideological themes and issues repeated in various combinations in Tim Winton's *Minimum of Two*, Wayne Macauley's *Blueprints for a Barbed-Wire Canoe*, Amy Witting's *I for Isobel*, Hannie Rayson's *Inheritance* and Raimond Gaita's *Romulus, My Father*. Before 2006, these views were found in Bruce Dawe's *Sometimes Gladness*, Philip Hodgins' *Dispossessed*, Jane Harrison's *Stolen*, Julia Leigh's *The Hunter*, Thomas Keneally's *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, Daryl Tonkin and Carolyn Landon's *Jackson's Track*, David Malouf's *Dream Stuff*, Christopher Koch's *The Year of Living Dangerously*, Brian Caswell and David Phu An Chiem's *Only the Heart*, and Garry Disher's *The Divine Wind*, among others.

The themes and topics examined in these texts are important and interesting. However, what is concerning is that the effect of this ideological uniformity emanating from the texts is the unstated but evident message that what is politically and socially important is what the Left perceives to be important. In addition, this ideological conformity also implies that when one displays interest in these issues, one is expected to broadly conform to a particular pattern defined by the po-

litically correct Left regarding the designation of victimhood and villainy to various historical actors.

This raises several questions. Is this ideological uniformity and conformity educationally advantageous in a pluralist society? Moreover, is it democratically fair to those many students and their tax-paying and/or school-fee-paying families who have different views from those of the politically correct Left? If it is educationally beneficial to have one's views challenged, as many educationalists on the Left could claim as a defence, then why should it consistently be the case that it is always the young Australians with, for example, liberal, or conservative or traditional nationalist views who are given the educational 'benefit' of having their views challenged in the classroom? Meanwhile, those families who support, for example, the left faction of the Australian Labor Party, Greenpeace or the International Socialists consistently have their views confirmed and validated.

The school English departments choose three or four texts from a list of 30 options. Although William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is on the list, which would be reassuring to those parents who desire a less politicised and more traditional English course, chances are that it may not be chosen by the English Department at their child's school. For example, those students whose school English departments in 2006 chose to teach Shakespeare's psychologically insightful *Hamlet*, Henry Lawson's cynically ambivalent *Short Stories*, Martin Scorsese's masterfully directed cinematic adaptation of Edith Wharton's exquisitely well-observed novel *The Age of Innocence*, and Sophocles' famous classical tragedy *King Oedipus*, did very well. These students were fortunate.

Meanwhile, students at schools that chose Paul Kelly's *Don't Start Me Talking*, Hannie Rayson's *Inheritance*, and Wayne Macauley's *Blueprints for a Barbed-Wire Canoe*, drew the cultural short straw. These students were less fortunate.

In addition, the choices of texts annually rotated onto the curriculum seems to reflect trends in the contemporary

political concerns of the politically correct Left, which provides circumstantial evidence suggesting that the educational establishment may be interested in using English to affect the political process regarding issues closest to their heart. For example, following the refusal of the Howard Government to accept the findings of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission report on the stolen generations, *Bringing Them Home*, a flood of texts coincidentally entered the English curriculum advocating politically correct positions contrary to that taken by the Howard Government. These included Jane Harrison's *Stolen*, and Daryl Tonkin and Carolyn Landon's *Jackson's Track*. This is a thematic trend that continues unabated with the recent addition of Hannie Rayson's *Inheritance* to the list, among others.

Following the defeat of the referendum on whether Australia should become a republic in 1999, by coincidence, texts were subsequently added to the English study list that espoused republican views, such as Brian Friel's anti-British pro-Irish-republican Marxist play *Freedom of the City* and the film *Breaker Morant*, which argued that Australia's membership of the British Empire was against Australia's national interest.

The Howard Government's stand on illegal immigrants preceded the addition of texts to the curriculum that argued for the acceptance of illegal immigrants, such as Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge* and Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*.

The Howard Government's decision to join the US-led Coalition of the Willing and contribute troops to the war in Iraq was soon followed (coincidentally) by the addition of anti-war texts – Graham Greene's anti-American Cold War tract *The Quiet American*, and Salem Pax's *The Baghdad Blog*.

Coincidentally, the texts added to the curriculum are never remotely supportive of Coalition Government policy. Coincidentally, they consistently seem to support the politically correct Left's position recently thwarted by government policy. Interestingly, on occasions when texts in

## YEAR 12 ENGLISH TEXTS AVAILABLE FOR STUDY IN VICTORIA

Niccolo Amaniti, *I'm Not Scared*  
Pat Barker, *Border Crossing*  
Camus, Albert, *The Plague*  
Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*  
Charles Yale Harrison, *Generals Die in Bed*  
Graham Greene, *The Quiet American*  
Mark Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*  
Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*  
Janet, Lewis *The Wife of Martin Guerre*  
Wayne Macauley, *Blueprints for a Barbed-wire Canoe*  
Tim O'Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods*  
Anne Tyler, *The Accidental Tourist*  
Amy Witting, *I for Isobel*  
Henry Lawson, *Short Stories*  
Tim Winton, *Minimum of Two*  
Tobias Wolff, *The Stories of Tobias Wolff*  
Hannie Rayson, *Inheritance*  
Arthur Miller, *A View from the Bridge*  
William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*  
Sophocles, *King Oedipus*  
*Fine Line* (TV series)  
*Gattaca* (film)  
*Lantana* (film)  
*The Age of Innocence* (film)  
*Voices & Visions from India* (CD ROM)  
Sylvia Plath, *Selected Poems*  
Paul Kelly, *Don't Start Me Talking: Lyrics 1984–2004*  
Raimond Gaita, *Romulus, My Father*  
Primo Levi, *If this is a Man*  
Salem Pax, *The Baghdad Blog*  
Xinran, *Sky Burial*

Students must study at least three texts from the above list. At least one text must be by an Australian or about Australians. Further, only one non-print text may be studied.

the curriculum are critical of Labor Party policy, it is because Labor Governments adopted policies that departed from the politically correct Left's agenda. For example, the deregulation of the financial sector by the Hawke Government, a policy influenced by economic rationalism, found criticism in English texts such as Philip Hodgins' *Dispossessed* and Hannie Rayson's *Inheritance*.

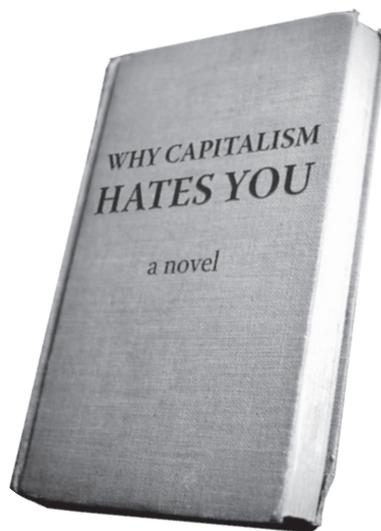
The criterion for text selection recommends that the works will be 'raising interesting issues and providing challenging ideas'. However, the choice of literature that is relevant to current issues can easily become political proselytising by literary proxy if there is no mechanism for accountability. What is suggested by this evident trend is that, currently, there appears to be nothing or no-one in the education bureaucracy to establish or ensure a degree of pluralism.

With the origins of what is now understood as political correctness stemming from the New Left and the (hippy) counter-culture of the 1960s, it is not surprising that, with the strong presence on the English curriculum of texts by authors who espouse politically correct views, that dimensions of the hippy lifestyle would be presented in accepting or favourable terms. This can even include the recreational use of illicit drugs. This complex, difficult and divisive social issue is of particular relevance to young people in their teens because these are the years when the temptations are more frequently presented to them and the peer pressure to take drugs is strongest. The Howard Government has expressed support for 'zero tolerance' rather than the harm-minimisation approach to illicit drugs, and it has funded public awareness campaigns to encourage young people to say no to drugs. However, a number of texts on the curriculum appear to present more counter-cultural attitudes.

In Hannie Rayson's *Inheritance*, a mother in the play, in jest, mildly criticises her son's generation for seeking 'ersatz adventure' in computer games or drugs. Her comment could represent disapproval or a kind of acceptance. It is not clear.

What is clear is that her son, who smokes marijuana during the play, is admirably presented as one of the main positive politically correct characters who stands up to the racists. He is depicted as insightful and as a character with whom the audience is invited to identify.

Andrew Bovell, who once co-wrote a play with Rayson, wrote the screenplay for a film text set for study, *Lantana*, an otherwise intelligent drama that mostly examines human relationships involving love.



Like Rayson, he could not resist an appropriately counter-cultural drug reference, with the character of a mother, whom the audience is positioned to see as a strong sympathetic character, advocating parentally supervised marijuana-smoking for her son in the family home. By contrast, the audience is positioned to see the father who rejects this policy as unreasonable. Presumably, this represents the screenwriter's support for the harm-minimisation approach to illicit drugs.

In some passages or references in Graham Greene's overtly existentialist novel *The Quiet American*, readers could legitimately interpret opium-smoking as described as sensuously alluring. Drugs are regularly used by the hero of the story, a character who is presented as a flawed but admirable individual with whom the audience is positioned to identify and regard as politically insightful, culturally sensi-

tive, and possessing a moral conscience.

On the other hand, there are drug references in several of Paul Kelly's lyrics, some of which appear negative while others are explicitly matter-of-fact about drug use, particularly those songs that seem to have been influenced by the observations of urban decadence expressed in the music of Lou Reed, whom Kelly admired. There is also a brief critical reference to illicit drug users in Mark Haddon's plea for tolerance regarding the sufferers of autism, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. When reflecting on the presence in the curriculum of these counter-cultural attitudes to the use of illicit drugs, or to support for the harm-minimisation approach, it is worth being reminded of another of the official text selection criteria. It recommends that the texts 'be appropriate for the age and development of students and, in that context, reflect current community standards and expectations'.

Despite its flaws, there is merit in the Victorian Year 12 English course. Many of the texts currently on the curriculum are worthy of study, and some are profound and enlightening. However, there is room for improvement. Unfortunately, some texts currently on the curriculum are of questionable value. Meanwhile, there are other texts that espouse different views to those traditionally listed that are also worthy of study and could be included.

There is a need for far greater pluralism. Perhaps the current list of 30 texts could be reduced to 20, with ten selected by the Left and ten selected by the non-Left, with the stipulation that school English departments must choose from both sides of the list. The ideal situation would be an English curriculum that is both philosophically broad and richly educational, where students are presented with a range of interesting ideas from which they can freely select or reject according to their capacities for reason and the dictates of their consciences.