

Political Literacy: Educating for Democracy

Hugh Collins

Professor of Government and Politics
Murdoch University

What is political literacy? What meaning are we to give to this topic?

Clearly, the idea of political literacy is part of the broader and more general concept of literacy. So before venturing into the specific terrain, it will be useful to get our bearings by considering some features of this larger landscape.

The first feature to remark upon is that *all* literacy is political.

Literacy has always been closely associated with the service of the state. Even non-literate rulers needed scribes to keep their records, to convey their instructions and to preserve their histories. Sir Humphrey Appleby is but the latest in that official line - and it is entirely in character for that role that Sir Humphrey is portrayed as the consummately literate figure, least himself on those rare occasions when he is lost for words, truest to life, as we might say, when composing or flourishing the unanswerable minute or artful disclaimer.

Indeed, Mr Clerk we might note that the title and function of your own Office relate directly to this scribal tradition. One of your distant official forebears provides an early example of the political function of literacy in this broad sense. Classicists among us may recall a famous passage in which Thucydides recounts an episode from the Sicilian campaign of 414BC. The Athenian commander, Nicias, wanted his perilous position to be fully understood at home. As well as the oral report entrusted to his messengers he took the unusual step of setting down his views in a letter, which was read to the Assembly by its clerk.¹ (Nicias's action was sufficiently novel for us to assume that his letter had more effect than latterday petitioners to the parliament may receive or expect.)

Among some scholars, literacy's close association with the state has reduced its reputation. Literacy is dangerous, they argue, precisely because it arms the state with such effective instruments of control as the bureaucratic file, the military directive, and the police warrant. From this perspective, campaigns for mass literacy can be disparaged as imperialist extensions of state control. Foucault and his disciples extend these ideas to suggest that all forms of codifying and communicating ideas create power which can be used coercively and repressively. The force of their argument is evident in the widespread concern in this parliament and the nation that a further concentration of media ownership in Australia would create a private locus of power incompatible with democracy.

Yet in emphasising the dangers of literacy, the radical critique risks romanticising the condition of the illiterate. In the modern world, to be illiterate is to suffer deprivation and vulnerability. The boundary line between the literate and the illiterate marks out differentiations of power, which are characteristically associated with significant social divisions such as class, gender, religion and ethnicity. Only literacy can confer the emancipatory possibilities of a fully human existence in the late

¹ Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, vii.8.2. For a discussion of the significance of this passage see William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy*, Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 78.

twentieth century. As Professor Jeanne Chall has remarked, like the rich who doubt that money brings happiness, it is only the well-educated who question literacy's value.²

Literacy does not necessarily equate with subservience. The power to read and write is a double-edged sword. It can control to be sure, but it may also be used to resist and to liberate. Classicists present would surely remind us that one of literacy's earliest functions was to ostracise politicians. (And anyone finding in these precincts a potsherd bearing the name of the Member for Blaxland might kindly give it to Mr Ian Warden, whose columns seem always to treat this place as a vast archaeological dig.)

The second feature I want to describe in the general landscape of literacy is a cluster of dimensions in which we customarily think about literacy. I shall call these dimensions literacy's extent, its depth, and its specific domains.

By extent, I mean the way in which we talk about literacy as a property to be maximally spread across a whole population. Much discussion of literacy refers to both the desirability and the means of extending it. Such concerns imply a horizontal dimension by which we measure the breadth of literacy across a society. Literacy campaigns are typically concerned with this dimension, seeking to maximise the sheer number of literate individuals.

By depth, I mean the way in which we distinguish levels of literate competence. This vertical dimension of literacy is implicit in such phrases as 'basic literacy'. We frequently distinguish, and we often need to certify, more or less elementary and more or less advanced levels or degrees of literacy. For example, what level of literacy is required to fill in a tax return, to apply for a driver's license, to enrol as a voter, or to read the *Sydney Morning Herald*?

By specific domains, I mean the way in which we treat literacy as parcelled out into particular contexts. Our adjectives give this game away, for we speak readily of mathematical literacy, or scientific literacy, or economic literacy, and so forth. Counsellors in study skills centres will tell you that it is common for students excelling in one field to encounter major difficulties in another. The diligent undergraduate who is scoring A's in History and Mathematics and Fs in Biology does not need a 'back to basics' regime, but specific attention to the levels of comprehension and capacity to use the correct language in the problem subject. The specialisation and fragmentation of modern knowledge (and some of my colleagues would underline this point by speaking of knowledges) make the field or domain dimension of literacy inescapable.

Recognising the domain dimension of literacy brings us to the heart of today's topic. For, in these terms, to ask the question, what is political literacy?, is to ask whether there is a specific domain here. I shall argue that there is. After briefly sketching the nature of this domain or field, I shall turn in rather more detail to the other two dimensions in which political literacy may be analysed. For the dimension that I have labelled 'extent', I shall focus chiefly upon debates about political literacy and schooling. For the dimension I have called 'depth', I shall consider the implications of political literacy for office-holding in our system of government. And I shall conclude by assessing the health of those institutions essential to political literacy in contemporary Australia - the press, the universities and the parliament.

The Domain of Political Literacy

What is the domain of political literacy? In a simple term, it is the polity. And in Canberra in the 1990s it seems important to assert the salience of a public sphere distinct from the economy. In this public sphere we are concerned with the exercise of power in society. For a democracy, that will mean constitutionally-guaranteed procedures both legitimising rule and also permitting changes of the rulers and in the rules by which the system functions.

We are inheritors of a long tradition of reflection upon politics and the state, so our domain contains a series of debates in which some old questions are continually reworked (for example, the question, what is an individual's obligation to the state?), while some new questions are posed as a consequence of historical change (for example, how is security to be achieved in a world with nuclear weapons?).

The task of political science, as I understand it, is to maintain and renew this tradition of reflection. Any number of methodological approaches and areas of enquiry have contested, indeed still strive, for sovereignty within political science. But considered as a collective enterprise, the distinctive preoccupations of this field of study have been constant over time and consistent with the nature of the domain it seeks to understand. These preoccupations have been to describe the institutional forms and processes by which power is exercised and organised, and to develop normative evaluations of these forms and processes. For many of us, the fascination of the subject is the interaction of these twin concerns - the constant dialogue between power's pattern and its purposes.

I have identified the preoccupations of political science within the domain of political literacy, because in each of the other dimensions of political literacy to be examined I shall be discovering more issues for the scholarly agenda of political science and more employment for its artisans.

Let me turn, then, to the dimension of political literacy that I have called its extent.

In contemporary discourse, political literacy usually refers to learning in schools about the institutions and processes of a specific political system. Having tried the experiment, I can report that plugging the term 'political literacy' into a bibliographical database will prompt a slew of references dealing immediately with curriculum issues in schools or with the political socialisation of youth - again with a heavy emphasis on schools and schoolbased learning.

The Extent of Political Literacy

In this dimension, then, political literacy has been understood as attempting a mass programme through education for citizenship. Here I shall briefly review some of the British reports and programs which have been especially influential in this context, before turning to recent Australian reports, with which I shall be primarily concerned.

I begin with the British case, because for curriculum specialists the most influential perspective upon political literacy and political education arises there. A 1974 statement by Professor Bernard Crick and his colleagues in the Hansard's Society's Working Party on the 'Program for Political Education' signalled a new direction for political education in secondary schools in the United Kingdom.³ Crick

³ Bernard Crick and Alex Porter, eds., *Political Education and Political Literacy*, Longman, 1978. This report includes the earlier working papers, several of which were published in *Teaching Politics*, the journal of the Politics Association.

and company sought to shift the focus of political education from imparting particular information to the development of political skills. For them, the application of knowledge was uppermost. "Political Literacy", they said, 'must imply the ability to use knowledge to effect in politics.'⁴ This activist program won significant policy support and dominated the academic debate about political education in Britain for a decade thereafter.⁵

The influence of this approach is to be found in a Report entitled *Encouraging Citizenship* by the Commission on Citizenship, which was established in December 1988.⁶ In his foreword to that Report, the Speaker of the House of Commons identifies official acceptance of the teaching of citizenship in schools as one of the Commission's 'major achievements'. By citizenship education he means encouraging young people 'to acquire and practice the basic skills of citizenship.'⁷ Most of this Report is devoted to citizenship education in schools and through voluntary service.

In Australia these two themes - an activist pedagogy and an emphasis upon educating for citizenship - dominate the treatment of political literacy in two recent reports by the Senate Standing Committee on Employment Education and Training. These reports are *Education for Active Citizenship in Australian Schools and Youth Organisations*, which was published in February 1989, and the follow-up report, *Active Citizenship Revisited*, tabled in March of this year.⁸

In its 1989 Report the Committee reviewed evidence of widespread ignorance of and apathy towards politics among Australian youth. In the Committee's assessment, such political ignorance, and the apathy towards political participation associated with it, are matters of grave concern. 'High levels of political ignorance in a community are ... a danger sign', the Report asserts. 'They are a warning that the quality of democracy may be under threat.'⁹

The chief responsibility for this condition, in the Committee's view, lies with our schools - a judgement shared by many young people surveyed in recent Electoral Commission studies. To quote directly from the Report:

In essence what is occurring across Australia is that even on a conservative view of the matter, students stand more than an even chance of completing their secondary education without taking any course which genuinely prepares them to be an informed and active participant in the democratic processes of Australian society.¹⁰

The Committee's recommendations for action flow directly from its assessment of the seriousness of the 'unmistakable deficiencies' it has identified. It calls for the

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 32.

⁵ See Tom Brennan, *Political Education and Democracy*, Cambridge University Press, 1981; Colin Wrings, *Democracy, Schooling and Political Education*, George Allen & Unwin, 1984; Robert Stradling, 'Political Education: Developments in Britain' in Derek Heater and Judith A. Gillespie, eds., *Political Education in Flux*, SAGE Annual Reviews of Social and Educational Change, Vol. 3; SAGE Publications, 1981, ch. 3; Ian Lister, 'Political Education in England, 1974-84: a briefing paper presented to the Global Education Centre of the University of Minnesota,' *Teaching Politics*, 16 :1, January 1987, 3-25. For a perspective of particular interest to Australia, see Alan Reid, 'An Outsider's View of Political Education in England: Past, Present and Future,' *Teaching Politics*, 14:1, January 1985, 3-19.

⁶ *Encouraging Citizenship: Report of the Commission on Citizenship*, HMSO, 1990.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. vi.

⁸ Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia. Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training. *Education for Active Citizenship in Australian Schools and Youth Organisations*, AGPS, February 1989; *Active Citizenship Revisited*, AGPS, March 1991.

⁹ *Education for Active Citizenship*, p. 9.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.31.

provision in the curriculum of secondary schooling of a programme of education for active citizenship. It calls upon the Commonwealth to designate this area as a priority for improvement, and to seek the cooperation of State authorities towards the same end. With some compelling evidence of problems in the attitude and training of teachers, it urges much greater emphasis upon the pre-service and inservice education of teachers in this area. It devotes detailed attention to the need for better teaching resources for the type of courses it is promoting as well as reviewing the range of recent innovations in this area.

The emphasis is upon schools and the curriculum. The framework for action is the encouragement of active citizenship.

Even before the Committee revisited the scene in its second Report earlier this year, the 1989 statement was having a discernible impact. One of the welcome aspects of the Committee's approach had been to talk directly with high school students. This experience evidently impressed members of the Committee, since most referred to it in their parliamentary speeches at the time the Report was tabled. It also ensured an interested reception for the Report in schools and syllabus committees, which as Chair of a State Committee I can attest. The Report's recommendations attracted, as well, the interest of State parliamentarians and parliamentary officers. In Western Australia, for example, *Education for Active Citizenship* is one of the stimuli behind the development of a parliamentary and electoral education centre, as well as for a major review of the senior secondary curriculum in Politics.

In all these ways, I consider the work and influence of the Committee to have been immensely helpful. The recognition and prominence it has given to the services of the Parliamentary Education Office, for example, is most important. With the teaching materials contained in the Parliament Pack, in the interactive, computerised interest of the Parliament Stack, through several videos, and in the newsletter and conferences presented by the Office, teachers and students alike have a much richer, more interesting and - best of all - constantly updated set of curriculum resources for understanding Australian national politics. For those students able to visit the capital, the activities arranged by the Office are an admirable example of active learning. When one adds to these good things the comparable work undertaken by the Australian Electoral Commission through its own study kits, school visits and Electoral Education Centre, the old complaint that interesting resources are lacking can no longer be sustained.

While saluting the Committee and its Reports for promoting and possibly protecting, these ventures, there are three aspects of its work that I wish to discuss more critically. Each relates to the question of political literacy. The first has to do with the notion of active citizenship; the second, with the contribution of Political Science to political literacy in schools; and the third, with school governance.

First, then, to active citizenship as a framework for political education.

'Active citizenship' no doubt commended itself to the Committee as a convenient phrase for its purposes. It helps to underline the Committee's concern that education in this area should not be primarily a matter of book-learning but rather the development of skills by which that learning might be put to use.

Now it cannot be denied that a certain air of wholesomeness surrounds the idea of citizenship. Doubtless, this partly accounts for its rhetorical convenience to the Committee. Yet, paradoxically, the apparently wholesome notion of active citizenship espoused in the 1989 Report drew fire from conservatives and radicals alike. Each of

these parties read the Report as a manifesto for the other's opinions. Thus, the radical critique presents 'active citizenship' as a conservative plot to produce pliant and obedient subjects, achieving stability by inducing false consciousness among the ranks of a potentially rebellious generation. By contrast, to conservatives the encouragement of activity, especially among the young, necessarily implies politicisation; the Report is exposed as a radical scheme to introduce into schools issues that belong in whatever is left of the family. Little wonder that the 1991 Report, *Active Citizenship Revisited*, spends its first chapter defending the 1989 Report against much of this crossfire.

I find the crossfire more educative than either of the critiques alone. These contrary readings reveal the fuzziness of the conceptual framework.

I believe that the issues may be more directly faced, the central difficulties more sharply focussed, if instead one approaches them from the perspective of educating for democracy. If the problem of democracy is made the framework for enquiry we shall immediately confront a principle which I believe to be fundamental. This principle holds that political education in a democracy should be hospitable to rebel and to conformist alike.

Now I have to say at once that the Report is not hostile to that assertion. My argument is simply that this principle is clearer, and its implications for curriculum content and practice more immediately engaged, if the conceptual framework for political literacy is the problem of democracy rather than the idea of citizenship. Good democrats will be good citizens; the reverse is not as obvious.

This brings me to my second difference of emphasis with the Committee's Report: the place of political science in political education. To be sure, *Education for Active Citizenship* recommends that courses in Politics should be available as electives at matriculation level in all secondary systems in Australia. With that splendid advice I have no quarrel. But the strategy adopted by the Committee for extending political literacy is to separate (some might say rescue) this area from the grip of specific Politics courses, relying instead upon opportunities for informing and equipping students in literary, historical or other social studies.

My contention is that, if the aim is to achieve a critical reflection upon politics, the core of this subject matter will be inescapably drawn from political science.

The alternative is to deal with politics superficially - as a matter of rote learning or of following rules without understanding what lies behind the rules.

Rote learning has long been a feature of political education, both formal and informal. As well as objections to the method in principle, it frequently miscarries in practice. My spouse informs me, for example, that as a young primary school pupil she regularly vowed at school assembly to fear God, honour the King, and promise Chifley to obey his laws. (This innocent evidence of incipient republicanism might have alarmed her teachers, but would not now surprise her friends.)

The problem I have with the thrust of the Committee's recommendation may be illustrated by an example drawn from an earlier attempt to inculcate citizenship. The syllabus for Civics in Western Australian primary schools in the 1930s was very precisely laid down. It moved from lessons on not spitting on trams and not writing on desks, to how to use a public library and how to obtain information from government departments, and finally to a course in history celebrating in Whiggish

fashion the culmination of human progress in the British Empire and parliamentary institutions.¹¹

Now the early stages of this 1930s curriculum certainly dealt with some useful aspects of civic courtesy and responsibility. Not spitting on the tram and not writing on the desk will likely remind one generation here of Tootle's instruction in *Staying On the Rails No Matter What*. (And in view of recent history in my state, some of you might think that Western Australia would have done well to keep the curricular emphasis of Lower Trainswitch into the 1950s and '60s).

Political literacy, at least in a democracy, has to move beyond this level to help students understand why certain forms are followed. As a concrete example, providing information about voter enrolment is undoubtedly one aspect of educating for citizenship. But this should quickly lead to learning about how votes for the Senate are counted. That lesson will in turn hinge upon why votes matter, upon different electoral systems and their consequences - in short, upon the whole theory of representation.

In this manner we are brought directly to central issues in the study of politics - to exactly that focus upon the evaluation of institutions that I described earlier. Political education in schools will require teachers whose training includes the academic study of politics, so that they have a grasp of the theoretical problems. In turn, political science in the universities will need to consciously equip teachers-in-training and to respond to the demands in schools for resources and ideas.

The Senate Select Committee on Political Broadcasts and Political Disclosures has recently heard from Mr Rod Cameron of ANOP of the effect of political ignorance upon the style and pitch of advertising in election campaigns.¹² His statement is a vivid illustration of the reasons for improving political literacy. But that improvement will rely upon the resources which only political science can supply.

My third comment on extending political literacy through the schools is that political education for democracy has direct implications for school governance. The 1989 Report acknowledges, but does not explore, this issue. Yet it is I believe, one of the major inhibitors to action and needs to be faced openly.

If students are to be encouraged to reflect critically upon problems such as power, authority, law, dissent and freedom, their reflection will include the structures of authority nearest them as well as the formal institutions of government in the nation. Education for democracy will almost certainly produce demands for democratic, participatory structures in schooling. Canberra led the way here in the '70s and early '80s: I believe, sadly, that has all changed. But in school governance, as well as in classroom practice, extending political literacy will have direct impact and we need to face that.¹³

The Depth of Political Literacy

¹¹ See Cherry Collins, 'An Australian approach to schooling: the record, the reward and the risks' in William G. Cameron, ed., *Australian Education 1988: A Turning Point*, The Australian College of Education, 1989, pp. 23-38, esp. p. 27.

¹² *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, Senate Select Committee on Political Broadcasts and Political Disclosures, 11 October 1991, p.281.

¹³ For attention to classroom practice especially, see Alan Reid and Bill Whittingham, 'The Constitutional Classroom: A Political Education for Democracy,' *Teaching Politics*, 133, September 1984, 307-330; Alan Reid, 'Approaches to Political Education - Classroom Practices', in Laurie Lewis, ed., *Social Education and Political Literacy*, Social Education Association of Australia, Monograph Series No. 3, Melbourne, 1987.

I turn now to the dimension that I labelled 'depth'. The emphasis on schooling which has been so common in the general treatment of political literacy has been restricted, I think to that earlier dimension of 'extent'. Yet you may have noticed that in discussing political education within schools, I was already calling for a deeper understanding of politics than mere instruction alone can offer. What holds for the governed applies also for their governors. In a democracy we should require office-holders to have an even firmer grasp of the values of the system and of the importance of relating what they do to its fundamental framework. We should surely expect more of ministers and senior public servants than we do of the nearly-18-year-olds who have been the focus of most attention concerning political literacy.

Perhaps I am especially conscious of this because in Perth we are involuntary witnesses to the need for it. At the Royal Commission investigating what is colloquially known as WA Inc, there is a daily parade of testimony illustrating the need for political literacy at the heart of our political system.

Before all the evidence is in, and before the Royal Commissioners have reported, it is important to suspend judgment. Nevertheless, taking the testimony that we have heard simply as a set of dilemmas, I believe there is already much to learn. We have seen in the testimony offered so far dilemmas of ministers in relation to senior public servants; dilemmas of members of cabinet in relation to decisions of the premier and a smaller group of ministers; dilemmas of department heads in relations with ministers and senior ministerial advisers; dilemmas of public servants cast suddenly into commercial roles; dilemmas of business executives in their relations with government, with political parties, and with the public sometimes, indeed, in distinguishing which of these they were concerned with at any moment; dilemmas of accountants and lawyers in their obligations to their clients and to the public.

All I wish to pull out of the evidence presented so far is my own impression that, in the testimony offered, the witnesses have had no vocabulary for articulating these dilemmas. What happened is presented neither as an exercise in expediency nor as a burden of responsibility; it typically emerges from the realm of necessity. There is no rationale except, characteristically, the denial of choice. This is a gross failure in political literacy.

We shall have to look to the Royal Commissioners to provide guidance about how such dilemmas are to be articulated; how a constitutional theory might connect these holders of office to the specific structures of power in which they find themselves; in short, how a language of politics is to be used.¹⁴

I have to say that the precedents for this are not encouraging. On the other side of the nation, for example, we can look at the Report of the Fitzgerald inquiry.¹⁵ I would argue that in chapter three its treatment of parliamentary accountability in Queensland is thoroughly unconvincing and a further example of the need for more specialised attention to these problems. Indeed, as an aside, I should confess that in seminars with senior public servants I have at times used an extract from that part of the Fitzgerald Report without revealing the source, inviting them to offer it a grade as if it were a piece of undergraduate writing. Upon their assessment, it has failed more often than it has passed.

¹⁴ Since this lecture was delivered, the Royal Commission has issued a Discussion Paper inviting public comment on that part of its Terms of Reference requiring it to report 'whether... changes in the law of the State, or in administrative or decision making procedures, are necessary or desirable in the public interest.'

¹⁵ *Report of a Commission of Inquiry Pursuant to Orders in Council* [The Fitzgerald Report], Queensland Government Printer, 1989.

Most recently we saw further evidence of this kind of deficiency, I believe, in the Report of the Finn Review: the report of the Australian Education Council's Review Committee, *Young People's Participation in Post Compulsory Education and Training*.¹⁶ It too is concerned with education, but in this case education for work rather than for citizenship. Among the list of recommendations it shows key areas of competence which the committee wants our schooling to provide. Under 'cultural understanding', the Report suggests that students need understanding and knowledge of Australia's historical, geographical and political context. Politics as context is a neatly passive way by which these representatives of the social partners in our corporatist state can deflect students from understanding the specific choices, specific values, and specific institutions, that are leaving them in the conditions in which they find themselves in 1991.

Work is being done on these questions. I salute my colleague Dr John Uhr, a former servant of the Senate with a keen eye for the way these problems arise, for doing much of the best work - again an example of political science in action.¹⁷ Today in Queensland there is a seminar discussing a code of conduct for officials which has been developed by the Electoral and Administrative Review Commission in Brisbane.¹⁸ In New South Wales, the Independent Commission Against Corruption has begun intensive sessions with public servants and public sector employees more generally, reviewing their work practices against the values which their ordinary activities are intended to promote.¹⁹ I believe that, in addition to giving attention to political literacy in schools, the Senate's committees could help by focusing attention on the broad ramifications of political literacy for representative democracy. This will have to include the education of office-holders and electors alike.

Free Institutions and Political Literacy

To educate for democracy requires free institutions. Three especially are of concern: the press, the universities, and the parliament. Each is intimately associated with political literacy. But the conditions in which they are able to support political literacy in Australia today are not uniformly positive.

No account of political literacy can ignore the press. Newspapers remain the primary means by which a literate population obtains political information and exchanges political opinion. Precisely because the written word provides a journal of record, the newspapers become the raw material for much other discussion (on radio and TV, in the parliament, in the classroom, on the factory floor, and in the boardroom). For the broadest possible political debate we shall need a range of opportunities for journalists and a diversity of vehicles of opinion. Concentration of press ownership is therefore undesirable from the perspective of educating for democracy and improving political literacy. The recent indication that a majority of Senators and Members take this view is a vindication of parliamentary democracy.

¹⁶ *Young People's Participation in Post Compulsory Education and Training* [The Finn Report], The Committee, 1991.

¹⁷ See, for example, John Uhr, 'Ethics in Government Public Service Issues', *Discussion Paper* No 19, ANU Graduate Program in Public Policy, June 1990; 'Ethics and the Australian Public Service', *Current Affairs Bulletin*, April 1990, pp. 22-27; 'Dilemmas in Administrative Responsibility', *Canberra Bulletin of Public Administration*, No 59, August 1989, pp. 25-27.

¹⁸ Electoral and Administrative Review Commission, 'Codes of Conduct for Public Officials', *Issues Paper No. 15*, EARC, 1991.

¹⁹ See paper by Mr Ian Temby, QC, 'Combating Corruption', at Conference on Business-Government Relations in Western Australia - Challenges for the Futures, Fremantle, W.A., 25 October 1991.

A further reason for seeking a diverse press and an improved one is that political journalism in Australia has been focussed almost entirely upon the executive and its rival. Little interest has been shown in parliament as an institution and in its contribution to politics. As in so many areas of vital public concern in Australia, for this we must rely on the ABC and Radio National. Dr Jenny Hutchison and her team on 'Ring The Bells' provide the only but excellent source of continuing information and analysis of the parliament.²⁰ It is an example others might follow.

The universities' contribution to political education in our democracy arises from their opportunity to reflect critically upon issues, institutions and values in the public sphere. That capacity requires a position of relative autonomy.

This is not the occasion for a generalised lament about the contemporary condition of our nation's universities. Especially in Canberra, you will already be aware of the increased control exercised by government, of the reduction in research funding outside the control of government, and of the increase in student load unfunded by government. I would simply highlight today the exhaustion which the combination of turbulence and overstretch have imposed upon university staff. This is especially the case in the social sciences, which, together with humanities, do not enjoy so favourable a student:staff ratio as other departments of knowledge. The consequence is a dulling of our critical capacity which may be convenient for the executive, but is unhealthy for democracy and scholarship alike.

I have acknowledged today that political science could and should be doing more in the development of political literacy. I doubt our capacity to meet these tasks if present conditions persist. As Alfred North Whitehead observed:

The modern university system in the great democratic countries will only be successful if the ultimate authorities exercise singular restraint ...²¹

The ultimate authorities in Australia have lately shown little restraint.

Finally, the parliament. This is surely the heart of the domain of political literacy. It is at the centre of the polity. Its connection to political literacy has long been its privileged place as a forum of protected speech on all matters. As well as that traditional role of statements in the chamber, there is the new and vigorous function of committee work. It is significant that I have dwelt today on a Senate Committee Report. For the hearings of parliamentary committees serve an educative function for committee members, but also for the public. They have proven a means for bringing wider voices into the public sphere - for joining expertise with power.

In Professor Reid's exposition of the 'trinitarian struggle' the role of parliament is shown to be crucial in the achievement of democracy, as both support for and restraint upon government.²² Happily, this institution offers at present a more encouraging prospect than either the press or the universities, although - I assume - only at the price of constant vigilance.

Mr Clerk your invigilating bell must be about to ring. In the manner of practised examinees, therefore, I had better return to the question.

²⁰ See Jenny Hutchison, 'Ringling Parliament's Bells on Radio National', *Media Information Australia*, No. 57, August 1990, 19-23.

²¹ A. N. Whitehead O.M., *The Aims of Education and Other Essays*, Ernst Benn Limited, 1950, p. 150.

²² G. S. Reid and Martyn Forrest, *Australia's Commonwealth Parliament 1901 - 1988: Ten Perspectives*, Melbourne University Press, 1989.

What is political literacy? As today's lecture has attempted to show, there is no simple answer to this question. Rather than offer a definition, I have proposed a framework in which to examine the problem.

Political literacy may refer to the extended provision of an elementary description of our political system - of politics as context. Such a description by itself may suit subjects; citizens it will hardly serve; democrats, never.

At a deeper level, political literacy in a democracy is presented as the capacity for critical reflection upon political institutions and processes, especially in terms of the values engaged by these institutions and processes. I have argued that such critical capacity is essential for office-holders in our system. Yet if our rulers are not to be a guardian class set apart from the ruled, political literacy of this kind will have to be fostered in the schools also. Enabling all to share in and to influence our political debates, we might then approach a contemporary version of the classical sense of democracy as ruling and being ruled in turn.

Does political literacy matter? Yes, it does: certainly, to all who care about the quality of Australian democracy. And here I am in full agreement with Senator Aulich and his colleagues.²³ The challenge is to build upon their recommendations, to ensure good educational programmes not only for all young adults, but also for office holders.

If political literacy is to flourish, the institutions vital to its success will be a free press, unfettered universities and an effective parliament. Here we might wish for more encouraging prospects.

Almost a century ago Sidney Webb set out in a letter to Graham Wallas his reflections upon Australian Democracy after accompanying Beatrice on her visit to the colonies. To his own surprise, Webb found the Australian Democracy 'an admirable success in all essentials' although he did find it lacking in intellectual leadership. The gentle English Fabian tells the friend who was later to become the first professor of political science at the London School of Economics and Political Science that:

The politicians and the newspapers are in fact, the *best* product of Australia; and they are very good indeed.²⁴

Do we still find intellectual leadership lacking in our politics? Would we give our politicians and journalists the same excellent report card in the 1990s that Webb handed in for their predecessors of 1898?

Sidney Webb chose his yardsticks for democracy wisely. In this domain, at this time, the achievement of political literacy will require the best that the universities, the press and the parliament singly and together can contribute. Educating for democracy makes us allies in this cause.

²³ *Education for Active Citizenship*, p.5.

²⁴ A. G Austin, ed., *The Webbs' Australian Diary 1898*, Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons Ltd., 1965, p. 115. (Emphasis in original).