

Attachment F

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Strong on the critical and weak on the thinking

By John Ridd
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Most of us know the apocryphal story of a proud mother watching a march-past that involved her son. "Oh look", she cried, "my Johnny is the only one in step".

The present debate about education is rather like that: the "Education Establishment" think they are the only one in step, it sees education in our schools today as being the best ever. A plethora of others - historians, geographers, mathematicians, english specialists, physicists, chemists, biologists and so on - think there are serious problems with what is happening to our children; they are all marching out of step - together. It is interesting to look at the remarks of a few of these disparate, intelligent and thoughtful out of steppers.

A recent out-of-step comment by geographer Professor Lidstone of QUT stated that "high school students are not presented with the fundamentals of geography, such as the formation of mountains or glaciers or the science behind issues such as the rain-fall cycle". He criticised the syllabi produced by the Boards of Study (the action arm of the in step Education Establishment) by stating that "integrated social studies doesn't do history well, it doesn't do geography well, it doesn't do citizenship-type things well. It quickly becomes a hodgepodge."

The number of out-of-step critics of how history is taught is substantial, many of them grumbling that it is now simply just a selection of disjointed bits and pieces. Of course history up to Year 10 exit is caught up in the so called integrated social studies referred to by Professor Lidstone.

The decline in the standard of mathematics is undoubted. In particular the standard of the great mathematical tool that is algebra is weak. Those in-steppers of the Education Establishment who doubt that statement should examine the first chapters of a Year 11 Maths B text in Queensland. They are overwhelmingly dealing with material that used to be handled in the lower secondary years.

The consequences of feeble maths in Years 8, 9 and 10 are shocking. That weakness inevitably causes a massive gap between Years 10 and 11. Even the hyper in step Queensland Studies Authority has managed to recognise that fact - albeit 20 years too late.

Enrolments in the most rigorous mathematics in Years 11 and 12 are down. Out-of-step Professor Archie Johnston, President of the Australian Council of Engineering Deans, referring to the feeble condition of engineering enrolments by domestic as opposed to overseas students at a time of high demand for engineers, stated (*The Australian*, January 11, 2006) that "the biggest hurdle is the mathematics; the demand for mathematics (in schools) has plummeted", and remarked that university training in engineering demanded a solid preparation in mathematics at school.

The problems in English are so well known as to require no further comment here except to remark that there are clearly many out-of-step people here as well.

The plight of the numerical sciences, with poor enrolments allied to and related to the non numerate condition of science up to the end of Year 10, is another discipline area that has many out of step critics. Senior science teacher Marko Voykovic, co-founder of education lobby group PLATO described science these days as being "sand pit science". He contends that the foundations of

science are not being put in place and that syllabi fail to provide content.

One of the most candid, knowledgeable and authoritative out-of-step critics of the syllabus-curriculum issue that lies at the heart of the so called education debate is Brother Michael Green, the Principal of St. Augustine's College, Cairns. He stated (*Cairns Post*, October 4, 2005) that the current education system is a flawed and discredited fad that is failing students and that the move away from a clear syllabus has meant that Queensland's curriculum has "degenerated into a confused and confusing morass where students are missing out on the basics they need". He commented on weakness in grammar, syntax, shocking habits in the setting out of arithmetic and the lack of general knowledge of basic history, geography and world events.

Brother Green also spoke with palpable sadness and anger of the fact that Queensland once led the Commonwealth in early and middle year learning but is now selling young people short. This tragic decline is a part of the overall collapse that has taken place in Queensland education over the last few years.

Another aspects of that decline was dealt with by me in a previous *On Line Opinion* article, "**Floating gently on a waft of edudribble**", that emphasised the fact Queensland once led the way in reliable assessment systems but has degenerated into a floppy unreliable mess. So this died-in-the-wool ex public system teacher and the principal of a Catholic school experience the same emotions. We are both out of step because we both recognise the awful damage being done to children.

The in-step Education Establishment claim that through the various Boards' syllabi they are encouraging students to think, to be critical and sceptical. Sadly for them there are out-of-steppers who think that current syllabi fail totally to do that. A recent editorial in *The Skeptic* magazine (Spring 2006 edition) emphasised the obvious idea that critical thought - scepticism - must be based on verifiable evidence. Enabling people to think critically "is not made easier by the fatuous notions pervading far too many of our education systems, luxuriating under the rubric of 'postmodernist theory'. Ostensibly aimed at fostering critical thinking, it does no such thing, being strong on the critical and weak on the thinking. By holding inter alia, that truth and facts are relative concepts, it fosters the belief that all opinions are equally worthy."

Those statements are the antithesis of material oozing from that super de luxe in-step body the Queensland Studies Authority who state in a maths syllabus "making explicit the fact that knowledge is historically, socially and culturally constructed". So pi and the exponential function are, for in-step "thinkers" historical, social and cultural constructs. Give me strength.

The QSA is essentially no different to the other Boards of Study. They are all powerful in that they determine the syllabi-assessments in every subject for every school. They are the militant wing of the in-step Education Establishment.

However sooner or later it will dawn on the various governments and oppositions that there are far more people who are out-of-step than are there are in the in-step Establishment. At that point parliamentary action will be taken to bring some sort of sanity to the Boards of Study syllabi-curriculum and associated assessment structures.

Personally I find the idea of direct government interference in such matters abhorrent. However the in-steppers have failed our children in spades and desperate situations call for desperate remedies.

But it would be preferable if Boards would reform themselves. Come on The Education Establishment.

Break step.

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