

PIBCI - Monthly Perspective

February 2021

Education and the future

As millions of students commence term 1 of the school year, both young people and their parents' thoughts will be turning to the future. Their hopes will lie in the new skills and knowledge they will learn as they strive to achieve a formal qualification. For the majority of students, securing a good education will be key to increasing their life chances. However, over the past forty years the role of education has undergone significant change in which the meaning of education has been gradually substituted with training. Furthermore, higher education's role to develop people's skills in critical thinking, community engagement and imagination is being undermined at the cost of a better and brighter future. The assault on our universities has witnessed the devaluing of critical thinking and civic engagement. As a consequence, an environment is developing where questioning our politics, our institutions and how we operate as a nation is perceived as a danger by a small and powerful elite that holds tightly onto the reigns of power.

A healthy society needs a strong and robust education system that teaches our young people the basic principles of ethics, civic duty, and gives them the tools to critically question our politicians and our institutions. A bright future is reliant on our ability to imagine new and novel ways to address today's challenges whilst rejecting so-called news and opinion that is served up by corporations as 'common sense' that helps to keep in place the status quo.

Education: Neoliberal style

For the past forty years the public has been drip-fed a specific view by our politicians and the corporate owned media that education is a specialised form of training. As a consequence, the concept of education has been redefined. Today, a good education has come to mean 'a higher form of training.' It has become a simple means to an ends; a thing you have to do to get a job, or better – start a career. This basic logic backed by the major parties and corporations has been sold to the public as a simple, despite being an

inherently flawed solution. The objective of getting an education is fast becoming a race to acquire a qualification so you can compete to become a paramedic, a lawyer, a child care worker, an engineer and so on. Instead of getting an education for life, higher education has become an avenue for securing some form of paid work. Since winning office in the 2013 federal election, the Coalition government has been peddling this narrow view and recasting our higher education institutions into jobs factories. Rather than educating the next generation, the Morrison-led Coalition government seeks to repurpose our universities into factories producing “job ready graduates”, so they can be fed directly into the job market. This short-sighted approach presses our young people through universities and other education institutions with the aim of spitting them out with a qualification. As soon as they leave university, they are saddled with a HECS debt (rebadged as a ‘HELP Loan’) and forced into the job market to compete with everyone else, whilst the corporate sector selectively scoops up those it wants.

Education is not training

Education is about empowering people. It is about inspiring young minds, exposing them to the mechanics of power, and sparking the imagination. Education is about teaching people how to apply new ideas so we, as a community can develop a bright future rather than being locked into the narrow constraints dictated to by the major political parties and the corporate owned media. Education is also about opening up new ways of seeing and making society a better place by giving our young people a sense of agency. In many ways, a university education is an education for the future, and how it can be made possible.

Education is not neutral

Throughout the past century, education systems across the world have been used by governments to promote public good or to promulgate narrow interests that serve a small ruling elite. Hence, it is important to understand that education should not be viewed as a neutral institution, as it has a distinct purpose to serve. Proponents who call for an unbiased education system also promote a particular stance – one that appears neutral on the surface, but in reality stymies progress and obstructs change. In effect, this approach is

designed to support the status quo. Hence, education is biased by its very nature. Given the right conditions, it can play a critical role in developing and promoting culture, promoting progressive ideas and placing hope at the forefront of our minds. Universities are places where alternative perspectives are fermented. They are places where new and progressive ideas take hold and are spread into the community and sometimes gain traction in broader society. However, education systems are also used to undermine progressive views, hollow out democracy and reinforce views by the power elite.

Assault on education

For over forty years, the neoliberal ideology has entrenched itself across the majority of our institutions, including the education system. The assault on higher education has witnessed the gradual insertion and dominance of neoliberal views into university curriculum. Universities and allied educational institutions have been hollowed out from within as neoliberal think tanks have taken root. This has been coupled with the appointment of senior university personnel with neoliberal leanings to key positions of influence. As a consequence, a significant shift has taken place in our school's curriculum, and beyond. The shift from supporting and promoting critical thought has witnessed alternative social and political views being pushed out into the margins of our education system. The knock-on effect is that the views of young generations of students are tinted with neoliberal leanings, lacking the knowledge and tools of critical thought and agency.

The objective of this sustained assault on education is to weaken the public's ability to withstand the corporate media's daily barrage of celebrity culture, sensationalism and lopsided opinion. The round the clock broadcasting of 'infotainment' is aimed at dulling our senses.

With the weakening of our education system, the corporate media's job is made all the more easy by selling us news and opinion that thrives on ignorance and over-simplification of complex issues.

The Morrison-led government's shake up of university fees in 2020 is further testament to the ongoing assault on higher education and the heartland of critical thinking – the humanities. The fee shake-up places the Arts degree into the Coalition government's crosshairs. Renown for educating people how to think, and not what to think, equipping students in critical

thinking so they can challenge assumptions, power structures and politics, the Morrison-led government has pushed the once affordable Arts degree into the highest price bracket along with law and business management. Conversely, subjects deemed to make students 'job ready' have been made more financially attractive. In essence, we are witnessing higher education being harnessed to support the needs of corporations, not the public.

A strong education system means a strong citizenry

We, the public are responsible for ensuring that our citizens, young and old receive an excellent education that prepares us for all life's challenges. A solid education system also helps to inoculate citizens from ignorance, cultural decay, political apathy, and the scourge of injustice and violence that feeds on a diet of racism, nationalism, disinformation and general contempt for reason.

At the heart of a strong and vibrant society is an education system that is available to all. One that gives hope to our young. Critical to a strong education system is its ability to equip the next generation of school leavers for the difficult challenges ahead. It needs to provide our graduates with the tools for the future so they can build a world that is fit for them, and better than the one we currently have. This means that places of education need to promote critical thinking so people can ask difficult questions of our political and business leaders. An educated public will demand a better future of our leaders.

Equipped with the tools of critical thought and imagination, an educated public will develop social and political alternatives that will challenge the tired and faltering views of the mainstream. As a society, we have to be prepared that we cannot return to the old way as our challenges (such as the climate crisis, rising inequality and injustice) need to be addressed by new and fairer approaches. Moreover, our unfolding circumstances may not permit our major political parties and corporate leaders to carry on as in the past, and pass off yesterday's outdated ideas as alleged common sense.

End the status quo

Real and meaningful change starts with you. Are you willing to make that change? Or, are you willing to put up with the tired old ideas served up by

the major political parties? Inaction simply encourages the status quo, and gives large corporations the green light to continue 'business as usual'.

Join PIBCI today. We are the only political movement that will place the public interests ahead of corporate interests. We need your support so we can register as a political party ahead of the next federal election. Time to register is limited, and your membership and the membership of your family and friends will put us closer to helping us challenge the duopoly of political parties, and large corporations.

Anthony B – Website Editor

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