

The defence of the nation

In its neglect of the crucial role of education, the Commonwealth Budget has ultimately endangered the defence of the nation it so seeks to protect argue Professor **MARY KALANTZIS** and Dr **ANDREW HARVEY**

THE present Commonwealth Minister for Education is fond of invoking the claim of Thomas Jefferson that 'Education is the defence of the nation.' Much is encapsulated in this simple statement. Jefferson himself was highly educated, a staunch advocate of free public education, and the founder of the University of Virginia. It was not for reasons of self-interest, however, that he supported investment in education.

Jefferson realised that the safety and security of the nation depended on a well-educated citizenry. Dr Nelson may also realise this, but it is possibly not a view shared by his cabinet colleagues. In delivering the Commonwealth Budget, the Treasurer concluded with the assurance that "This is a Budget to keep Australia safe, our borders secure, and to keep our economy strong." Yet by neglecting education, it is a Budget that paradoxically and unnecessarily imperils the long-term safety and security of our nation.

Apart from being the engine of the new economy, education is also the primary bulwark against racism and intolerance. The immediate aftermath of September 11 saw the burning of mosques and flags, the flaring of religious tensions, and the paranoid invocation of cultural stereotypes. However, it also witnessed renewed interest in religious studies and the release of a plethora of books concerning the Taliban, al Qaeda and the values of Islam. Interestingly also, the popularity of teaching degrees rose substantially in both the United States and Australia.

Amongst the predictable bigotry and zealotry which followed the attacks, some small solace could be taken in the widespread quest to explain the inexplicable which followed. Yet the thirst for knowledge may coincide with, or even be predicated on, feelings of confusion, disorientation, or cultural anomie. The Australian Council of Deans of Education (ACDE) has argued that these feelings are widespread in the new economy, and that education has a crucial role in providing cultural meanings, acceptance of diversity, and security of identity. Without these things, no amount of weaponry can ultimately protect a nation from others or itself.

New Learning: A Charter for Australian Education (ACDE: 2001) extols the potential role of education in harnessing multiple identities, promoting productive diversity, and producing citizens both well-connected and secure in their identities. The document highlights that the driving social ethic of our times – economic rationalism – simply does not supply cultural meanings sufficient to sustain people. Rates of suicide, depression and drug-taking provide ample evidence of the extent of confusion and cultural loss, and highlight the continuing importance of identity and belonging, to young people in particular. It is within this context that education must be renewed as a focal point for

personal development and community wellbeing.

Learning which can be customised to engage students from diverse backgrounds and with different needs; which actively affirms diversity, building on the cultural capital of communities and individual students; and which seeks outcomes which are commensurate but not necessarily the same, will be that most conducive to social cohesion and economic prosperity. In Australia, intolerance and racism can be best combated by promoting civic pluralism in education settings. The concept of civic pluralism recognises that the multilingual, multicultural heritage of our citizens is one of our most important resources, and that education institutions must stress the importance of learning diverse languages and cultures for all students.

As the Charter outlines, there is a number of concrete ways in which this civic pluralism could be promoted, including: restoring and extending Indigenous bilingual and language revival programs; establishing an Indigenous university on a distributed model; establishing a "global communities" curriculum for all students; replacing the National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Strategy with a comprehensive national languages funding mechanism which extends funding beyond the four designated priority languages; and creating public access television devoted to community language broadcasting.

So far, however, two of the major education decisions of the third-term Howard government have been to abolish funding altogether for the National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools strategy, and to promise no additional public funding of education overall. Some have argued that greater investment may be forthcoming after the higher education review, when more concrete decisions may be made in the light of reforms. However, the federal Budget and the rhetoric of Ministers suggest that there is little hope of a change of mind regarding overall public funding, despite the fact that our direct public expenditure on education is considerably lower than the OECD mean.

The ramifications of neglecting education extend beyond economic loss, though this loss itself is immeasurably great. Early in the twentieth century, Theodore Roosevelt showcased American military power by sending the so-called Great White Fleet across the globe. Nearly a century on, military might remains important, but recent events in both the US and Israel have highlighted the limitations of traditional tools of defence. By themselves, no amount of ships, planes and weapons can defend Australia or any other nation from hostility or paranoia. If Australians are to feel secure in a globalised environment, we must promote social cohesion, interpersonal skills, international engagement, and cultural tolerance and understanding. Without a well-



Professor Mary Kalantzis



Dr Andrew Harvey

educated citizenry, none of these things is possible.

It is not surprising that the Commonwealth government stressed the importance of national safety and security in the 2002 Budget. Indeed, many have argued that the emphasis on border protection was the decisive factor in the re-election of the Coalition last year. Doubtless, debate will continue on the extent of the risk to Australian sovereignty, but uncertainty is undeniably a motif of the post-September 11 world. Whether for patriotic or pragmatic reasons, then, a traditional khaki Budget has been delivered. These are not, however, traditional times, and 21st century security relies on a nation not only well armed, but well educated. Arguably, in its neglect of the crucial role of education, the Commonwealth Budget has ultimately endangered the defence of the nation it so seeks to protect.

■ Professor Mary Kalantzis is president of the Australian Council of Deans of Education and Dr Andrew Harvey is the council's executive officer. *New Learning: A Charter for Australian Education*, is available at <http://acde.edu.au>

The politics of PELS

The plan to extend PELS to students studying in private institutions marks a significant shift in policy says **LAUCLAN CHIPMAN**

NOTHING much in the Federal Budget for higher education? That seems to be the consensus. Yet one decision signals a very important change. It is to legislate to give access to the Postgraduate Education Loans Scheme (PELS) to students enrolled in postgraduate non-research degrees delivered by eligible accredited private providers.

In a media release issued on Budget night Federal Education Minister Dr Brendan Nelson named the four eligible institutions as University and the Christian College Queensland, the Melbourne College of Divinity in Victoria, and Tabor College in South Australia are the only nominated institution to be officially designated a university. Like the seven public universities based in Queensland, Bond is established as such under an Act of the Queensland Parliament.

The Christian Heritage College (CHC) was established in 1986 and has strong links with the pentecostal Christian Outreach Centre movement, founded in Brisbane City in 1974. CHC offers postgraduate programs in the humanities, education, and business. Its teaching qualifications are recognised for service in Queensland and independent schools.



Lauchlan Chipman

The Melbourne College of Divinity (MCD) was founded in 1910 and operates under legislation of the Victorian Parliament. It claims to be one of the world's oldest ecumenical institutions. The MCD has long been associated with a number of the University of Melbourne place's denominational residential col-

leges, and since 1993 has been formally affiliated with the university itself. It currently has more than 350 potentially eligible postgraduates.

Tabor College describes itself as a multi-denominational charismatic Christian Education Centre, and has branches in Sydney, Melbourne, and Hobart, with its national headquarters in Adelaide City. It offers postgraduate courses in ministry, inter-cultural studies, and teacher education.

According to Budget papers, extending PELS to these four institutions will result in additional tuition loans to some 2000 eligible students over four years, grossing \$18.7 million, to be repaid on an income contingent basis through the income tax system, like HECS.

The extension of PELS from existing eligible institutions to Bond, CHC, MCD, and Tabor is planned to take effect from 2003, and will apply to commencing and continuing students. It may not be plain sailing. Scheduling these institutions as eligible requires legislation, and the Labor

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