Wednesday 1. It has nearly been a decade since Dr. Terry Matherell set in motion the forces that now shape state education in NSW. He sowed a sour and tragic collection of weeds: devolution, a prime example of Orwellian Newspeak, gave more power to the centre, strengthening the hands of the Minister and Departmental apparatchiks; the organisational practices of downsizing attempted to increase productivity with fewer employees, but probably increased lack of trust in management and a decline in workplace loyalties. He also gave us the tragically flawed idea that experience does not matter, and that anyone able to address a few criteria, master interview techniques and knock together a CV can be entrusted with education administration and decision making. There are two other Matherell legacies; the notion that teachers are in fact servants, the more servile and compliant the better; and the thrust to make education theory and practice reflect corporate and market place ideologies and practices.

In all of this a few things were overlooked, ignored, or simply swept under the carpet. Education is about human beings; it is about people; it is a people intensive process; it is about human relationships. It is not about objects or products, nor is it a process that is essentially about the quantifiable or the measurable. And in the Australian context it should also be about democracy; not lip-service democracy, but real democracy, where schools of thought do contend and real flowers do bloom.
Saturday 4. I am revisiting the anti-Stalinist poetry of Yevtushenko; he is helping me make sense of state education in NSW. My superiors sometimes say I am not polite when I argue points of policy and philosophy and I am accused of rudeness. I am fast coming to the conclusion that dissent these days is equated with rudeness, no matter the tone or language used. Ideological uniformity is good manners. Frighteningly this is not only a feature of the staffroom, but increasingly applies to society generally. However Yevtushenko says my behaviour is okay—the lies and ignorance of officialdom are more disgusting. Yevtushenko says that policy makers and bureaucrats regard those who are thoughtful as dangerous, people who should be liquidated. Yevtushenko makes the point that policy makers and bureaucrats elevate administration above all else, a process facilitated by intimidation, paperwork of doubtful value or veracity, and deceit; he also writes of overseers growing fat while slaves produce more for less.

I am also reading John Ralston Saul, The Unconscious Civilisation (Penguin, 1997). He too is helping me make sense of state education in NSW. Saul is a Canadian critic of the trend towards corporatism and conformity. He describes a process by which the classic driving forces of citizen-based democracy, the virtue of uncertainty and knowledge which fosters doubt, are subverted by corporatist information, goals, procedures, and the snake-oil promises of globalisation, technology, and market place ideologies. Debate is tied down by technological babble, minutiae, and alleged inevitabilities; common sense, creativity, intuition, ethics, memory, and reason are the casualties. What we end up with is fascism without the uniforms.

Monday 6. I am not surprised these days when I learn of current practices around the state. Schools, for example, where an executive clique hives off from the rest of the executive and teaching staff to run a feudal enclave; where the holding of staff meetings has been terminated to prevent input from “confident and articulate teachers”; where tracking sheets follow the professional lives of staff, charting and profiling everything from attendance at staff meetings to sociability in the common room. No wonder Yevtushenko and Saul make a lot of sense to me.
One day, hopefully, it will all implode. And then perhaps some 21st century fixer will be called in to radically reconstruct the whole sorry affair. Until that time the everyday realities will no doubt continue: massive daily staff absences; increased taking up of long service leave, and leave without pay; schools only functioning because of casuals; education policies switching at the urging of the latest faddish guru; climates of confusion and fear engendered by talk-back personalities, media tirades, and the latest rumour from someone who met someone who heard something at an in-service; insecurities promoted by hucksters and snake-oil peddlers regarding the future; the psychological and physical exhaustion of teachers as work expectations erode concepts of ‘weekend’ and ‘holiday’.

Wednesday 8. It is a process satirised in another context by Michael Palin in his novel *Hemingway’s Chair* (1995). First came plastic name tags, complete with faculty and rank. Then came terminology changes; teachers as service providers; students as consumers; principals variously education facilitators and managers. Now corporate uniforms. Not everywhere, but in a few schools and apparently catching on. Advocates praise the senses of unity, purpose, and pride that uniforms engender; there is also talk of corporate spirit. And uniforms set an example; good enough for staff, good enough for students. Tax deductions also. Well fuck that for a joke. I go along with Dr. Davis McGaughey, who retired as Governor of Victoria in 1992. He reckons citizens need to “refuse to allow terms applied to the business area to apply to hospitals, research institutions and the like….there are other criteria by which to allow ourselves to be judged”.

Friday 10. Peter Weir’s film *Dead Poets Society* was released in Australia in 1989. I remember one Sunday afternoon’s screening at the local cinema. Nearly every teacher in the district seemed to be there. I watched their faces as they streamed out; excitement, chatter, pride, the glow of camaraderie. The film’s release coincided with the onslaught of Metherellism. Teachers under attack; schools under attack; education being gutted and hung out to dry. In retrospect, and from an education viewpoint, the film was about everything Metherell’s corporatism set out
to destroy. It was about teachers as individuals, about the freedom to teach with zeal and without circumscription; it was about teaching and education as excitement and questioning; it was about the crucial importance of the humanities; it was about education and teaching as being something other than the inculcation of corporate values and market place ideologies.

**Saturday 11.** The application of corporatism to education is turning teaching into a process of wall-to-wall assessment and reporting. Outcomes modelling, discredited historically from Stalin through to Robert McNamara’s planning of the Vietnam War, reduces teaching to checklists, statistics, and ever increasing distances from human realities. Unfortunately I fear teaching and education are becoming more suited to Monty Pythonish accountants than to flesh and blood professionals who, minus corporate uniforms and name tags, grasp the metaphorical truths of *Dead Poets Society*.

**Monday 13.** These are the rules of education debate. Don’t get upset; don’t get angry, don’t display passion; don’t show emotion. And above all else, don’t be original. Just blend in; be low key and non assertive. Break the rules and out come conflict resolution strategies. Fire and passion equate to conflict; maybe even perversity. This is the subtle thrust of consumer oriented culture. Never rebel; never question. Just be cool, accept, and consume. Brand names are the only things to get excited about. All new products are good products. One legendary spittle licker who made it to the top during the Metherell era told me “All change is good change”. Pol Pot was a history teacher once; he probably said that too.

**Tuesday 14.** Since beginning teaching in 1970 I’ve worked in the old technical education, the prison, state school, and tertiary systems. I’ve found that the best teachers, those who are motivated and enthusiastic, and who in turn can motivate and enthuse students, are also those who have independent minds, personal approaches to teaching, and are imaginatively creative. It is a combination increasingly out of kilter with current times. Unfortunately the New Education seeks tailored square pegs for tailored square holes.
Wednesday 15. According to reports in this morning’s papers, the Kennett government has turned a slice of the Victorian matriculation over to the McDonald’s corporation. A small slice admittedly, but a slice none the less. And why not? Corporate involvement in schooling, even in the areas of curriculum construction and control, has been a contentious issue in American education in recent years and is part of the New Right baggage train. It had to appear here sooner or later.

Education for the 21st century. McIdeas. Feast on swill; a smorgasbord of immediacy, self interest, consumerism, materialism, utility, and compliance.

Monday 20. I have lost count of the times futurologists have tried to convince me of a technologically gee whiz future, one in which we will feel alien in unless we immerse ourselves in the culture and accoutrements of microchips and megabytes, a future in which the knowledge we already have does not apply, and in which few of the lessons or experiences of the past are applicable; a future in which present skills are irrelevant and in which history finally comes to rest.

Sorry. I see a different future. Its shape is suggested by factors like the pollution and smoke clouds currently wreaking havoc in S.E. Asia; corporate vandalism in our planet’s Amazon Basin lungs; resurgent nationalism and ethnic animosities; resurgent Islamic and Christian fundamentalism; resurgent Astrology; global corporatism threatening notions of democracy and citizenship; the backwards march of working and social conditions to the nineteenth century; the ever increasing gap between rich and poor, globally and within Australia; the increasing retreat of the rich into fortress enclaves; the deadening of the human spirit by consumer materialism...

So how do our Educrats respond? Easily. Simply become silver tongued propagandists for the gee whiz future. Tie schools ever more closely to corporate and consumerist values and goals. Glibly accept the spurious notion that schooling significantly contributes to unemployment. Leave little curriculum space or time for reflection, thought, creativity,
individuality, questioning. Test; retest; assess; and reassess; gather and analyse statistics ad nauseam. Tie teacher success to test results and statistical measurements and profiles. And to break the soul deadening experience of it all, for fun link up with circuses like Olympics 2000.

**Thursday 23.** What lies around the corner waiting to ambush the education community? For a glimpse of a possible immediate future we need go no further than the July 1997 British White Paper on Education (Excellence in Schools), a hurriedly concocted product of the Blair Labour government that seems to embrace much of the Tory education agenda.

Literacy is a central issue (shades of Dr. Kemp). Perceived national literacy problems are to be tackled with a structured hour per day from September 1998 in primary schools. Proposed implementation procedures provide for greater government involvement in the direction of teaching processes, methodologies, and classroom organisation. Coming on the heels of the National Curriculum there is increasing concern amongst British educationists and teachers that Britain is moving into an over prescriptive and over structured education era. Sort of like teaching by numbers.

The Tory notion of education target setting continues, on an individual school basis. Lots of rhetorical targeting based on national testing data, but very short on details, especially when it comes to funding and resourcing. Sort of like Stalin’s Five Year planning and bureaucratic goal setting; bugger local conditions and other inconsequentials.

In a daring futurist move the Blair government even seeks to enter the home, and parent-child relationships. A home-school contract system is proposed, imposing an education role on parents on a regular basis. As Anthony Adams of Cambridge University’s School of Education comments, behind good intentions there seems to be “a highly paternalistic, even authoritarian, attitude which...bodes ill for the future of any real democracy under our present bureaucratic-centred government”.

Saturday 25. Throughout the 1990s the Asian Tigers have been the economic miracles to be studied and learned from. Emulated if possible. High-rise super models of development. Must become more like them. Now the Hong Kong sharemarket is sending shock waves around the world. Apparently the Asia region of the world economy is up shit creek. A financial analyst on TV this morning claimed the root causes were in Thailand and Indonesia where Greed and Corruption held sway. Golly gosh. I find that hard to believe. Surely, if human factors like that can cause huge economic problems wouldn’t we be studying morality and ethics in our proliferating school, TAFE, and tertiary economics, business, and management oriented courses?

Friday 31. When I was a kid Dad told me that if we put yabbies in a saucepan of cold water and slowly boiled them, they would not realise they were dying. I reckon something like that is happening today. Democracy is dying around us, gradually being dismantled by economists, and we don’t realise it. One day we’ll wake up in Fascist Land. No uniforms mind you, just business suits, designer labels, gym-toned bodies, and manners. Apparently Dr. Goebbels’ dinner parties were the epitome of sophistication, manners, grace, wit, and style.

Look around Howard Land: Kennett’s secret police; attempts to gag the Law Reform Commission; political threats to the independence of the High Court; constriction of citizen access to the legal system; attempts to decrease media diversity; attacks on the ABC; attempts to destroy the trade union movement; threatened use of troops on the waterfront...

The commodification of education is part of the process, and best seen at work in the tertiary sector. In an open society universities function as a dynamo, helping generate ideas and debate. In Howard Land savage funding cuts are forcing universities to go commercial. The casualties must be institutional autonomy and academic freedom, and with these the drastic curtailment of independent research, criticism, and analysis. Instead we’ll get tailored research, tailored knowledge; after all what is the use of research and knowledge that does not have monetary or commercial value?
The worship of utility ultimately leads to the circumscription of democratic debate and free speech, a moral and intellectual disease analysed in the 1920s and 30s by anti-fascist writers as they tried to alert Europe to the impending future. Check out James D. Wilkinson, *The Intellectual Resistance in Europe*, (Harvard University Press, 1981); incredibly relevant reading.

In open societies the humanities are the source of much of the richness, depth and diversity of ideas, discussion, debate. In Australia the humanities are under siege; strategies in response to Government funding cuts result in humanities staff cuts, departmental closures, increased class sizes and work loads, less time for research and writing, the drying up of research grants, and loss of future expertise as young scholars move overseas. The irony is that the demand for undergraduate humanities courses in Australia is second only to the demand for management and business courses. Obviously the Youth of Australia want one thing, but the Elders have a different agenda.

A grim picture when added to the contexts sketched above. I can feel the claustrophobia of it all. The doors are closing.

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