FOUR DECADES OF BODY-SURFING
THE BREAKERS OF SCHOOL REFORM:
JUST WAVING, NOT DROWNING

Hedley Beare

The waves of reform, they are called. What follows are the observations of an old man of the sea, weather-beaten and bronzed, but not browned off by riding for several decades the dumpers, and with the same exuberance as the dolphins do. Nothing is quite as exhilarating as when the surf is up, and I have seen a lot of it. Swimming skills, I have discovered, are not the whole story. I have also learnt the value of assiduously studying the tide charts and reading carefully and constantly the short and long-range weather forecasts. And I have always stayed close to the water. All these things matter. Just now, though, I am surveying the long capes and bays of the coastline, the great sweep of the sky and the erosions made by storms, and speculating on how the geography of the seascape has altered. Waves of change have done it all.

The Two Major Cradles of Reform

There were two, notable, decade-long episodes which pushed the school reform movements into the shapes they took. The first was the period of post-war reconstruction after the chaotic mess of 1939–1945. The end of the Second World War produced the need for the rehabilitation, re-settlement, and employment of returning service personnel, and the so-called baby boom. A decade and a half later, this nest of demands had produced the educational upheavals of the 1970s – curriculum reform, school reform, system reform, massive new building activity, indeed an almost total re-jigging of educational provisions.

The second period of widespread social and economic reconstruction occurred in the 1980s, coinciding with the terms in office of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister in Great Britain and of Ronald Reagan as the President of the United States. Their political stance was similar, namely to introduce policies based on the market economy, allowing the built-in incentives of competition to introduce the discipline of getting value for the dollar and of achieving outcomes through private enterprise.

*Hedley Beare*
The waves of school reform over the second half of the twentieth century were fashioned in these two cradles and their aftermath. There is a tendency to overlook the educational upheavals of the 1970s and the 1990s, as though schools have always been the way they are now. It is prudent to consider just how far and how quickly the education enterprise has come, and for educators to be given some praise for the miracles they have achieved.

The First Major Reform Period

There are few people around now who remember what schooling was like prior to the post-war period of upheaval. Schooling then was staid, stereotyped, almost one-track in its orientation. Of the secondary school cohort which began at around Year Seven, only about 5%, or 1 in 20, survived to Year Twelve. It was a process designed to produce drop-outs, and where one dropped off the conveyor belt determined the employment options and life chances available to that person. It was a process almost designed to confirm class structures. So post-war reconstruction delivered an upheaval that imposed enormous pressures for change on a one-best-way system.

Expanding the Post-School Area

Governments were forced to cater for the education and retraining of returning service personnel. It also gave those ex-servicemen and women a second chance to change their station in life and it produced a challenge to entrenched class consciousness. For example, men and women born into the working class could now go to university. There was inordinate pressure on tertiary, post-school, and technical training places, and all the post-school areas expanded, a movement which left universities starved for funds and requiring national bale-out money. The technical institutes and colleges and ultimately the whole Technical and Further Education (TAFE) sector were produced by this period.

The Post-War Baby Boom and Enrolment Pressures

At secondary school level, there was huge enrolment pressure resulting from the baby-boom. A system which had existed to weed out the non-academic students and to produce an elitist tertiary sector was challenged to expand to cater for a wave of new enrolments and the wide spectrum of students which showed how inadequate had been the curricula in use in those schools. In physical terms there were too few schools and huge building programs were undertaken, many of them in new housing estates. There certainly were not enough teachers, and teacher education expanded. The independent schools were also claiming that they could not keep going because of the insurmountable demands for places, plant, and programs. From the mid-1960s, then, the universal cry was for more resources, for tax dollars. There were insufficient funding and personnel to sustain the educational enterprise the country needed.