More Civics, Less Democracy: Competing Discourses for Citizenship Education in Australia

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Introduction

It has been common in the last decade to read about the “renaissance” in civics and citizenship education in Australia (Print, 1997). This is an allusion to a deliberate revival of civics and citizenship education that has had bilateral support from the major political parties and at all levels of government. Yet if “renaissance” refers to “a revival of learning and culture,” then such a claim for civics and citizenship education in Australia has been somewhat premature. Australian politics in the 1990s was subject to successive waves of disparate ideological influences, and these influences fundamentally altered the contexts in which the revival of civics took place. What may have started as a “renaissance” was short-lived, thus emphasising the importance of understanding how different contexts in Australia have shaped an emerging civics and citizenship education.

In the early 1990s, under the influence of a young Labor Prime Minister, Paul Keating, Australia appeared to be embracing the need to become an independent republic, sought engagement with Asia, acknowledged the need for reconciliation with indigenous people and in general sought a new role for itself in the global community (Kennedy & Howard, 2004). Yet the excitement created by this “big picture” politics was short-lived. In 1996 Paul Keating’s government was replaced by a conservative coalition under John Howard. His government looked back to the 1950s to derive images of Australia that were safe and secure, while also making a concerted effort to place much greater reliance on Australia’s British and European heritage.

The revival of civics and citizenship education may have been conceived in a renaissance-like environment created by the second Keating government, but it was delivered in an environment more akin to that of the “dark ages” where the future was created by looking backwards. Yet, in retrospect, this kind of conservatism may seem benign and even welcome. The events of September 11, 2001, in New York and October 12, 2002, in Bali ushered in a new and more destructive kind of conservatism that has sought systematically to undermine the very institutions of democracy that even traditional conservatives have come to value. The Australian story in the new century became
one of escalating involvement in international conflicts. Australia has been engaged in
two wars (Afghanistan and Iraq) and several United Nations (UN) peace keeping op-
erations (East Timor and Solomon Islands). What is more, there has been the vexed and
shameful issue of the imprisonment of refugees seeking asylum in the country. Austra-
lia’s official civic discourse post-September 11, 2001, is more akin to what some writers
have referred to as neo-conservatism—not just a longing to return to the past and its
assumed safety, but an active opposition to universal human rights and the kind of
freedoms we have come to associate with liberal democracy. Neo-conservatism, or at
least its Australian equivalent, has fundamentally changed the Australian political and
social landscape and this landscape was inherited by the newly elected Rudd Labor

There may well be more civics and citizenship in Australian schools than there was
in the early 1990s. Yet this has not created a renaissance! The key issues are the ends to
which civics and citizenship education have been directed and its effectiveness in
combating new and destructive forces in the Australian polity. These are the issues to be
addressed in this chapter, for they are issues about the nature and function of Australian
democracy in the 21st century and civic and citizenship’s support for it.

The purposes of this chapter, therefore, are to:

• investigate the nature of the changes in the Australian social and political
landscape, since they have significant implications for programmes of civics
and citizenship education;
• assess the extent to which these changes are reflected in civics and citizenship
programmes in Australia; and
• suggest ways in which civics and citizenship can contribute to the education of
an intelligent citizenry in these troubling and uncertain times.

Australia’s Changing Social and Political Landscape:
Contexts for Civics and Citizenship Education

The so called “civics renaissance” initiated under Paul Keating was abruptly brought to a
halt once the Howard government came to power (Kennedy & Howard, 2004). It took
just over a year before the Howard government’s version of civics was announced. The
Hon. David Kemp, Minister for Employment, Education and Training, used the opening
of the Curriculum Corporation’s Annual Conference to make the public announcement
(Kemp, 1997). Unlike the previous version, this one was not preceded by any consulta-
tion with educators or the community although it did seek to retain a bipartisan approach
and it did retain a commitment to a similar level of funding. Yet it most definitely sig-
nalled a change in direction.

The only written text available for analysis is Minister Kemp’s speech, subse-
quently turned into a Ministerial Statement (Kemp, 1997). It remains the only extant
statement of the Howard government’s position on civic education. The speech looked
back to and valorised the development of democratic institutions in Australia consequent