

## Howard's legacy lives on in new era

Kevin Donnelly | *December 04, 2007*

**IF one wants evidence of the power and longevity of John Howard's influence on Australian politics, then look no further than Julia Gillard's comments on Sunday about teaching Australian history and the need for a back-to-basics approach to curriculum.**

Sounding like the conservatives so despised by the cultural Left, Labor's deputy leader said on the Ten Network's Meet the Press that she preferred the term settlement, as opposed to invasion, when describing European colonisation.

Mirroring concerns raised on these pages during the past 12 months or so about educational standards, Gillard said: "We need to make sure that kids end up with all the basic skills. You've got to be able to read, you've got to be able to write, you've got to be able to do maths. Unless you have those basic skills, you can't unlock the door to wider learning. Our focus will be on literacy and numeracy."

That the Rudd Government's new-found cultural conservatism represents a sea change to past Labor policy is even more obvious on reading speeches on the culture wars given by Gillard when in Opposition.

In a speech to the Sydney Institute in 2003, which she described "as a call to arms to the Centre and the Left", Gillard bemoaned the Howard government's ascendancy in the culture wars, which she portrayed as "fuelled by bile and venom" and orchestrated by journals such as Quadrant and so-called neo-conservative commentators associated with The Australian.

Immediately before last month's election, Gillard refused to accept that terms such as Left and Right had any political currency. Not so in her Sydney Institute speech. Not only did Gillard describe the Australian Left as including those from "liberal Left to radical Left", she also argued that Labor and the Australian Left must combine "for the hard task of winning the culture war and creating a new vision for this nation".

Gillard's 2006 speech to the NSW Fabian Society, once again, concluded that a significant reason for Howard's electoral success was his pursuit of the culture wars, described as based on "fear and division", and that the ALP and progressive forces must not resile from fighting the good fight: "To end the Howard government, we have to understand the reasons for its success to date and the underlying attitudes of our community. Then we have to stand and fight for our values. We cannot shy away from the so-called culture wars out of fear of being wedged by right-wing caricatures of Labor values. While fighting for our values, we have to expose the true values of the Howard government."

The ALP's education policy paper, dated November 18, for which Gillard as Education Minister will be responsible for implementing, provides further evidence of the resilience of Howard's conservative social agenda. Under the heading Greater Accountability, the ALP policy promises - as did Brendan Nelson when he was education minister - to have report cards in plain English, where students are graded A to E and the word fail returns to the classroom.

In contrast to the present lowest common denominator literacy and numeracy testing, in which students are assessed only in terms of a minimum standard, Labor also promises to measure student performance in terms of levels of proficiency; one would hope similar to the US, where national tests are measured in terms of basic, proficient and advanced.

Holding schools accountable for performance is another initiative that signals a change to the ALP's view of education. Instead of measuring how successful the education system is in terms of money spent, the focus is on learning outcomes and how best to identify and turn around underperforming schools.

Although it is not going as far as the league tables introduced under the Blair government in Britain, the Rudd Government intends to make school performance data publicly available, allowing parents to identify successful and underperforming schools. During the primary years, a minimum of five hours of mathematics is in; spell checks are out; spelling is in; self-expression is out; learning correct grammar, punctuation and syntax is in. The ALP policy paper is happy to state: "Sustained attention to the basics should be evident throughout a student's entire schooling career, but particularly in the early years and primary school."

When describing its approach to developing a national curriculum, the ALP paper thankfully acknowledges that to be effective any national curriculum must be clear, concise and concrete. In addition to benchmarking the proposed national curriculum against existing state and territory best practice, one also hopes that those developing the curriculum will look internationally.

While Kevin Rudd repeats his mantra of an education revolution, especially when it comes to computers, ironically there is something very old-fashioned about the ALP's agenda. The present funding formula for non-government schools is guaranteed, at least until 2012; accountability and a back-to-basics approach is centre stage; and curriculum, to be acceptable, must focus on content instead of new-age competencies and generic skills.

To win elections, it is vital to remedy one's weaknesses and to nullify opponents' strengths. With the culture wars, especially education, it is clear that the ALP successfully staked the Howard government's conservative agenda. Whether the Rudd Government will be able to deliver, only time will tell.

*Kevin Donnelly, a former Howard government employee, is director of Education Strategies in Melbourne and author of Dumbing Down (Hardie Grant Books).*

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