

From the President

On 21 October 2014, Gough Whitlam passed away at the age of 98. Whitlam was prime minister of Australia from 1972 to 1975. The Whitlam government abolished university fees from 1974, which were not reintroduced until in 1989 the Hawke government set up HECS, the Higher Education Contribution Scheme. From then on, all university students would pay fees, either up front to receive a discount, or by instalments through the tax system once their earnings reached a certain level. "If it wasn't for Gough Whitlam, I wouldn't have gone to university" is a familiar catchphrase. But is it true?

Elena Pasquini Douglas, a social and economic commentator, was raised in an anti-British Italian–Irish Labor family. Popular denunciations of the Menzies era resonated with her. Australia was saved from alleged torpor by Gough Whitlam, Bob Hawke and Paul Keating. So she was surprised to learn, as she wrote in the Review section of *The Australian Financial Review* of 24 January 2014 ("Rethinking History: Stolen Legacy"), that there was another great champion of Australian higher education: Robert Gordon Menzies (1894–1978). She describe his achievements:



Leth Maitland, President

Turning to the facts: expenditure on universities under Menzies increased tenfold between 1955 and 1966. Enrolments expanded eightfold from 12,000 in 1938 to 96,000 by his retirement. The Commonwealth Scholarship scheme, envisaged by Labor's Ben Chifley, was implemented by Menzies in 1951. By 1963, some 37 per cent of Australia's full-time students had all their university fees paid and a means-tested living allowance. The 1965 Martin Report noted an additional 39 per cent of students received bursaries and cadetships. That means three-quarters of all university students had their education paid for by the Menzies government.

So Whitlam expanded free university education, but he did not invent it. Free for most under Menzies, free for all under Whitlam. Douglas quotes a Menzies speech to illustrate what Menzies thought about the value of higher learning:

He said: "Are the universities mere technical schools, or have they as one of their functions the preservation of pure learning, bringing in its train not merely riches for the imagination but a comparative sense for the mind, and leading to what we need so badly—the recognition of values which are other than pecuniary?"

Douglas notes also the Menzies "was awarded numerous prizes at university; aside from Alfred Deakin and Gough Whitlam, no other prime minister has been as erudite." So there we have it: a long bipartisan tradition of free university education, from the Menzies to the Fraser governments.

At the same time, there was government financial support for: firstly, free public school education, with grants to non-government schools introduced by the Menzies government in 1964; secondly, subsidised affordable fees for trade and other education and training provided at TAFE colleges; and thirdly, adult education provided at institutions such as evening colleges and WEA.

Flash forward. The current Commonwealth education minister, Christopher Pyne, on 20 May 2014, told ABC's *Lateline* that graduates earn "75 per cent more over a lifetime than people without a university degree" and "\$1 million more than people who don't go to university." It seems that for this minister, the value of a higher education is primarily vocational and pecuniary. Nonetheless, governments do still provide financial support for all sorts of courses in schools and universities. But in adult education, government financial support is now restricted to strictly vocational courses.

WEA Sydney remains committed to liberal adult education. What does "liberal" mean in this context? The *Macquarie Dictionary* defines "liberal arts" as "the course of instruction at a university, comprising the arts, natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities." WEA is not a university, although many WEA tutors are also university academic staff, and some of our courses for inquiring adult minds are quite comparable to university undergraduate courses. In other respects, the dictionary definition of "liberal" subject areas closely matches the core program of studies to which WEA in Sydney has been firmly committed since it was founded in 1913. WEA Sydney provides lifelong learning to enable participants to become informed citizens beyond the boundaries of their trade, calling or profession. Informed citizens can participate more effectively in our community and democracy. Our broad range of educational opportunity which would have appealed to Menzies, who valued a university as "a home of pure culture and learning" as well as "a training school for the professions," as "the home of research," as "a custodian of mental liberty, and the unfettered search for truth." To Menzies, "a rugged honesty of mind that does not shrink from the truth... [is]...one of the noblest of virtues." Our courses would also have appealed to Whitlam. Today's politicians seem to prefer ideals-free vocational education.

When I first joined the board of WEA Sydney about two decades ago, WEA received government funding as an adult education provider, and as additional funding for a vocational education program of very professionally delivered computer and training courses. Then funding was available only for vocational education. From 2015, WEA will receive no vocational education funding. WEA will receive much smaller scale funding for limited programs such as Tech Savvy Seniors. Government funding for WEA was only seven per cent of income when I joined the board, and has declined progressively. From 2015 it will be a very small source of income. Difficult savings measures described in the executive director's report are necessary because WEA must now rely almost entirely on its course fee and rental income. I commend WEA staff for taking on additional duties after some staff left and have not been replaced. I commend the WEA librarian, Dr Jim Packer, for continuing to work one day per week to provide professional library services. I commend the library volunteers for keeping the library open the other four days of the working week. WEA Sydney has faced significant challenges during my current two-year term as president. I believe WEA Sydney may soon face further very significant challenges, as it strives to continue to provide its quality liberal adult education.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Leth Maitland".

Leth Maitland
WEA Sydney President