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## The wrong men behind curriculum review

The right has a problem with co-opting the school curriculum. But not if it is doing the co-opting.

By **Sharon Beder**

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Education Minister Christopher Pyne has appointed think tank commentator and former Liberal Party chief of staff Kevin Donnelly and Ken Wiltshire, professor of public administration in the University of Queensland's business school, to review the national school curriculum with the aim of removing "partisan bias".

Pyne claims he wants children to be taught critical thinking but Donnelly, though he makes a living from critical thinking, thinks critical thinking should be removed from the curriculum. In his 2004 book *Why Our Schools are Failing* Donnelly rails against the belief that education is essentially a process "where students had to be 'socially critical' and 'empowered' to enable them to 'challenge the status quo'".



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Donnelly is an associate of right-wing think tank, the Institute of Public Affairs, and is on record criticising the whole idea of a national school curriculum. In an institute backgrounder on education reform in 2000 he asked: "What is the point of parents and students being able to choose which school they want if all schools are made to follow the same centrally determined curriculum?"

Ironically, he pointed out that "if the curriculum is centrally mandated, especially by the state, then it is very easy for it to be co-opted by whoever is in control at the time to further their own ends". Apparently this is not a concern if he and Christopher Pyne are the ones in control and doing the co-opting.

Donnelly has criticised modern school curriculums for enforcing "a politically correct, black-armed view" and argued that schools are places where "feminists and left-wing advocates of the gender agenda argue for the rights of women, gays, lesbians and transgender people".

His personal think tank, the Education Standards Institute, instead favours "a commitment to Christian beliefs and values".

The notion that schools have become too left-wing and politically correct arises from developments that began during the 1960s and '70s when many young people subscribed to a counter-culture movement that questioned central aspects of mainstream materialist culture, including its non-egalitarian structure, business values and impacts on community and environment.

The movement influenced schools and brought a new emphasis on equity and critical thought. Teachers encouraged debate about social institutions and news topics.

Curriculums in many nations began to include sex education, peace studies and feminist

studies and to be inclusive of the concerns of indigenous people, immigrants and the poor.

Business leaders and conservatives attributed the growing activism of school students to the broadened school curriculums. Teachers were accused of being left-wing and anti-business.

Donnelly claimed in 2000 that the Queensland curriculum - presumably before it was reviewed by Wiltshire in the mid 1990s - focused "on such issues as the environment, multiculturalism and social justice; all with a future perspective to ensure that students were ready to embrace the brave new world of the politically correct".

An aim of business-driven reforms around the world has been to redefine and confine the core knowledge that schools teach and ensure it celebrates the status quo rather than questions it.

In 2006 the federal minister for education, Julie Bishop, argued that a "back-to-basics uniform national curriculum" was necessary because left-wing "ideologues" had "hijacked" the curriculum and school students were subjected to "trendy educational fads".

Prime minister at the time, John Howard, noted: "Until recent times, it had become almost de rigueur in intellectual circles to regard Australian history as little more than a litany of sexism, racism and class warfare."

The four-person committee appointed at the time to draft a national history curriculum included Gerard Henderson, head of a right-wing think tank, and Geoffrey Blainey, a controversial historian who popularised the term "black armband view of history" to describe a critical view of history which supposedly induces shame for the way Aborigines, immigrants and women were treated.

Today Pyne and Donnelly also want the school curriculum to emphasise the legacy and benefits of Western civilisation.

Donnelly claims the history curriculum "undervalues Western civilisation and the significance of Judeo-Christian values to our institutions and way of life".

Pyne wants "the curriculum to celebrate Australia". He insists that Donnelly and Wiltshire will "bring a balanced approach" to the review, by which he presumably means one that he agrees with.

He also says that "not everyone will be pleased with his choice of who will review the curriculum". That sounds like a pretty safe bet.

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