

its rationale so muddled—that it comes as a relief to read a clear-headed account of what government should and should not do. In this light, it seems churlish to take Otteson to task for the simplicity and clarity of his argument—but this is what I feel drawn to do.

Otteson places considerable weight on the distinction between virtue and justice. In order to respect moral personhood, Otteson argues, we must refrain from compelling others to exhibit virtue; the role of the state is limited to enforcing justice. This is surely right: but where is the boundary between the two concepts? Otteson suggests that virtue typically involves positive action, while justice is mainly comprised of negative forbearances (p 22). This response is appealing; in some respects, however, it seems a little too convenient.

Otteson supports his positive/negative distinction by appealing to our moral intuitions (p 27). When someone fails to act virtuously, we often say ‘I disagree with your choice, but that is your business’; however, we do not say ‘you should not kill an innocent person, but that is your business’, ‘you should not steal, but that is your business’ and so on. Otteson goes on to apply the distinction to Peter Singer’s hypothetical ‘Pond Case’, concerning a person who comes across a child drowning in a shallow pool. Otteson suggests the person who does not save the child is vicious, but not unjust; we might shun and despise her, but we should not punish her—and the state should not get involved (pp 29 and 148–9).

Presumably, then, we would tend to say of such a person: ‘you should have saved the child, but that is your business’. But would we really say that? Is it really consistent with moral personhood to refrain from

saving a person’s life, when it would cost us next to nothing to do so? It seems more plausible to say that, as well as negative forbearances, the duty to respect personhood imposes a limited range of positive duties. There are many areas where we should not tell people how to act, even if they behave poorly; however, when it comes to saving a vulnerable person’s life, the situation surely changes.

Otteson later speaks of positive interference with others’ choices as an ‘exception requiring special justification’ (p 122); this presumptive interpretation of the positive/negative distinction seems closer to the mark. Otteson is right to treat respect for personhood as the yardstick of what government should do—and justice more often requires us to refrain from harmful actions than to render assistance to others. However, classical liberalism does not depend upon treating the positive/negative distinction as a rigid dichotomy; on the contrary, it enriches the tradition to adopt a more flexible moral framework.

Muddying Otteson’s distinction in this way does not detract substantially from his attack on Singer’s use of the Pond Case—nor does it seriously weaken the appeal of his classical liberal vision. Quibbles aside, Otteson succeeds admirably in offering students and laypeople a non-technical and often humorous account of the classical liberal outlook. It gives me considerable satisfaction to imagine undergraduates reading *Actual Ethics* and (hopefully) engaging with its arguments. Otteson exhorts his readers to take classical liberalism seriously—one can only hope his efforts receive the consideration they deserve.

Reviewed by Jonathan Crowe

Dumbing Down: Outcomes-based and politically correct—the impact of the Culture Wars on our schools

by **Kevin Donnelly**,
Hardie Grant, 230pp, \$24.95,
ISBN 9781740664882

Australia is a small country and if you spend long enough working in the education area you will eventually get to know the major players. Most of us get along, despite our differences, and can maintain a civil dialogue (at least in public) but Kevin Donnelly is the exception. He is a polarising figure in the education debate and has attracted more unrestrained contempt than any education writer in my (relatively short) memory.

This is partly karma—Donnelly gives as good as he gets. But it is also because he has been a very loud whistle-blower. Many people have long been aware of the infiltration of left-wing bias and progressive educational philosophies into teaching and curriculum in schools and concerned about its deleterious effects. Few have written extensively on the subject, however, and none as forcefully and as successfully as Donnelly.

Donnelly himself is not a newcomer to the cause. It has only been in the last few years that he has been granted an apposite forum, through the pages of *The Australian*, to take his crusade to the wider public. Although Donnelly had achieved some success with his first book, *Why Our Schools Are Failing* (Duffy and Snellgrove, 2004), it is his sustained criticism of outcomes-based education, political correctness and post-modernism in school curricula—both in opinion pieces in the

national broadsheet and spin-off media appearances—that have given his arguments popular and political currency.

In *Dumbing Down*, Donnelly brings together these arguments and provides the detail and documentation to support them. He has undertaken a systematic perusal of mind-numbing government curriculum and policy documents to show how in each and every state and territory, students and teachers are being shortchanged by the so-called educational experts.

While Australia's adoption of OBE illustrates the power and influence of the left on the curriculum, it should also be recognised that OBE's focus on measuring outcomes and making schools accountable has also attracted the support of those on the right...OBE, with its fetish for measurement, checklists and lots of busy work, appeared as an ideal model to those educators more concerned with meeting the accountability demands of their political masters than supporting classroom teachers. The result is that state and territory governments of different political persuasions have been strong advocates of OBE and industry and business groups, such as the National Industry Education Forum and the Business Council of Australia, have fallen victim to an educational approach that has led to falling standards and a dumbed down curriculum. (p 33)

Donnelly also quotes extensively from various people and organisations who have been influential on educational policy development, such as US

educationist William Spady, the Australian Education Union and the Australian Council for Educational Research, showing how closely they are aligned with the path schooling has taken over the past several decades.

Much of the book will be familiar to regular readers of Donnelly's work but this is one of the keys to Donnelly's success. He has been prepared to repeatedly and dogmatically make his point whenever the opportunity presents itself. Donnelly is a perfect example of the old adage that a squeaky door will eventually get oiled. He certainly has the ear of the Prime Minister, who launched *Dumbing Down* at Parliament House, as well as senior politicians on both sides of the House.

While the strategy has paid off, the unfortunate flipside can be the alienation of people who would be sympathetic with a more nuanced treatment of the issue.

One person's passion is another's hyperbole. An example is Donnelly's debate in the pages of *Quadrant* with Alan Barcan, who has been observing and writing on the influence of ideology on school curricula for nigh on fifty years. Like

many others, I am convinced by Donnelly's broad arguments and his evidence, but think there are more grey areas than Donnelly is prepared to concede.

Dumbing Down is strongest in its unflinching criticism of the wholesale adoption of outcomes-based education by academics and bureaucrats, based on little more than its ideological appeal. Donnelly also demonstrates conclusively how endemic postmodern and counter-culture philosophies

have become in the study of English literature and history. He argues persuasively that the over-emphasis on critical analysis (for example, feminist, Marxist, post-colonial interpretations) in the study of literature is insidious, and for a large proportion of students, academically inappropriate.

While such a difficult and abstract task might be suitable for tertiary undergraduates, one wonders how year 12 students are able to cope with such a challenge. There is also the danger, in attempting to help students deal with such complex and contentious theoretical viewpoints, that they are given a superficial and simplistic understanding. (p 85)

Donnelly erodes confidence in the ability of states and territories to develop good curricula, and impugns the other major players including teachers' unions and the Australian Council for Educational Research. From this it would seem that a national curriculum is the obvious solution, but Donnelly does not favour this either, for good reasons. The

result is a somewhat anticlimactic final chapter. The book would certainly have benefited from a more comprehensive treatment of the possible remedies and policy alternatives.

Dumbing Down is nonetheless an indispensable counterpoint to the myriad books on education that advocate 'student-centred', skills-based learning in its various forms.

Since the 1970s the mantra that school education should be 'relevant' and driven by students'



interests and experiences has been rarely questioned. It has been widely accepted among education faculties and government departments and agencies that all knowledge is fluid and open to interpretation. The process of learning has been elevated above content to the extent that only a handful of states actually teach courses called geography and history. Thanks in no small part to Donnelly, more and more people are acknowledging that the pendulum has swung too far away from the traditions of education that have served Western societies well.

Donnelly's mission to restore 'the best that has been thought and said' to school education is a worthy one and *Dumbing Down* is an important contribution towards that goal.

Reviewed by Jennifer Buckingham

Bad Dreaming: Aboriginal Men's Violence Against Women and Children

by Louis Nowra

Pluto Press, 2007

102pp, \$17.95

ISBN 9780980292404

'A lot of people use the word racist too easily,' then ALP President Warren Mundine told a recent public forum on Louis Nowra's essay *Bad Dreaming*. 'I don't think that calling someone racist will wash away the issues.

Anyone who thinks that Aboriginal communities don't have domestic violence or child abuse problems is kidding themselves.'

Racist is certainly something that author and playwright Louis Nowra has been tagged since he published *Bad Dreaming*, a reportage-style essay on domestic violence and child sexual abuse in indigenous communities. Professor Larissa Berendt, for example, protested to *The Age* that 'what you are left with is the impression, whether he means it or not, that violence is part of Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal people haven't done enough to stop it.' Professor Mick Dodson also objected that Nowra had failed to understand how Aboriginal systems of policing and behaviour differed from Western notions.

The issue of indigenous violence has been particularly charged since Northern Territory Crown Prosecutor Nanette Rogers went public with her concerns on the ABC's *Lateline* programme in May last year. Nowra is also not indigenous, but he grew up with domestic violence and has

collected newspaper clippings about violence in indigenous communities since the 1980s. He accepts that his essay, particularly where it deals with indigenous culture, has upset some people. But he insists that he is not making moral judgments about traditional behaviour and he argues that the problem lies in the 'pathological distortion of what was traditional'. What drove him to write the book is that 'at its dark unwholesome core', he says, 'it's a man's problem.'

Certainly Nowra leaves us in no doubt as to the dark unwholesomeness of the core. Much of the essay unfurls by way of storytelling—horrific brutal stories of the treatment of women and children by men, both in their communities and again in the criminal justice system. While the stories almost start to overwhelm the essay, Nowra does not lose sight of his three main contentions.

First, he argues, violence against women featured in traditional indigenous culture; child sexual abuse did not. Second, we—governments and sundry bystanders—have shielded the perpetrators of the violence by refusing to criticise aspects of Aboriginal culture and by applying a separate judicial standard that has allowed the perpetrators to get away with rape and murder. And finally, he contends, 'if there is a contradiction between women's rights and indigenous rights, then one must say that women's rights should take priority in our society.'

What makes these points so contentious is the fundamental division in indigenous affairs between what Cape York leader

