

Working class boganism stealing our best and brightest

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A large part of society still regards education with a jaundiced eye.

How many slogans have we endured over the years telling us that if we want to advance Australia, fairly or otherwise, we need to use our cranial neurons instead of merely our biceps?

The most unfortunate must have been Bob Hawke's contribution, The Clever Country, which, about 23 years since he first uttered it, is starting to sound like a parody.

In truth, Australia's prosperity has been underwritten by our role as China's quarry and farm. Understanding this doesn't take rocket science, which is fortunate because there aren't too many rocket scientists left in this country.

A report released by the federal government a couple of weeks ago revealed there aren't enough scientists, full stop. What's the problem? There was a time half a century ago when nearly every Australian male close to that subspecies now referred to as "nerd" or "geek" wanted to be a scientist.

In the days immediately after realising we easily could have been walloped by the Japanese in World War II, Australians had an epiphany. Propaganda - such as that the Japanese had such bad eyesight they could not fly fighter planes - had been proved false. Not only could they fly them, the ones they designed and built were better than anything we could produce without help.

After the shock of that war we realised we needed a manufacturing industry and technology that, in an emergency, could be used to help kill people or stop them killing us. It was an era when there was real excitement over events like the British blowing up an atomic bomb in our desert or somebody making a better nylon shirt.

In the years since, however, we had the flourishing of flower power in the late 1960s to the early '70s and the Vietnam War, where the technologically superior US was beaten by a bunch of determined peasants. So for dubious cultural reasons, saying you were a scientist would no longer get you a pretty girlfriend (or boyfriend).

Now another malaise has crept in, affecting attitudes to education generally, particularly among the Anglo working-class who increasingly seem to be dropping their bundle. People in this demographic are steadily falling behind students from families who don't speak English at home.

A look at the enrolment of selective secondary schools such as Melbourne High and Mac.Robertson Girls will reaffirm the dominance of Asian or European-background students - and these are not just kids pushed along by "Tiger Moms".

A friend whose son attended Melbourne High reported working-class Anglo kids were the most likely to drop out. Having been a working-class Anglo kid who attended a selective high school, I can understand why.

In my case it was the constant battles with parents who felt threatened by my attempts to be educated. They didn't mind practical stuff that might have helped me get a good trade, but the theoretical stuff left them terrified that I was "getting beyond myself". This was a quaint old-fashioned way of saying "up myself".

Australian scientist Peter Doherty, who jointly won the 1996 Nobel prize for medicine, is the product of the state school system (Indooroopilly State High School in Brisbane's west). He is scathing of the middle-class defection to the private school system, which he thinks has dried up our best source of scientists (bright kids from state schools).

But Doherty also recognises that education can be a very threatening force when introduced into a working-class environment: "Don't underestimate it - going to university can break up families, especially in a family that has not had much exposure to education."

This problem has been exacerbated in recent decades by the rise of an aggressive anti-intellectual subculture usually called boganism. It is a particular problem for teachers, especially in the demoralised state sector.

Melbourne University education professor Simon Marginson, who lives in the western suburbs, knows the story.

He says part of the reason the Chinese do so well is that they are immune to mainstream anti-intellectualism because their families have a tradition of learning that goes back thousands of years. "In the

West, universal education is a relatively new thing. Public education is less than 200 years old. There still is a view that it is just another piece of paper."

Marginson thinks there is a particular problem for science common to most English-speaking countries except Canada, which has a strong French influence. He says that in Australia, particularly in working-class cultures: "Not all people think it is smart to learn; some feel it is not going to help them much and they think people who do well at school are wankers. It is a view pretty commonly felt and is not terribly conducive to having a highly educated population."

It is an attitude that might be summed up thus: Edjakayshun never done me no good.

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