

# A NATION OF STRANGERS

## How a civic vacuum enabled antisemitism

Alex McDermott





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This paper is part of The Centre for Independent Studies research program, The New Intolerance: Antisemitism and religious hatred in a fracturing civic compact. The program of antisemitism research has been made possible by the generous support of Simon Mordant AO and the Luminis Foundation.

**LUMINIS FOUNDATION**



Analysis Paper 108

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# Foreword

The Centre for Independent Studies' antisemitism research program was established to confront a surge in Jew hatred that erupted, seemingly without warning, after the atrocities of 7 October 2023, leading to the subsequent murderous attack at Bondi Beach on 14 December 2025. Yet what is becoming increasingly clear is that we are witnessing not a sudden contagion but the surfacing of a long social decay. Alex McDermott's new report supplies what that argument most needs: an account of where that decay began and of how it might be arrested.

His diagnosis turns on two related failures. The first is the steady rise of civic ignorance, a collapse of basic knowledge about our institutions and shared inheritance so steep that, on the most recent national testing, barely a third of Year 10 students reach a basic standard.

The second, and more corrosive failure, is a deliberate pivot away from any common civic identity toward a fragmented pluralism in which the young are trained to read their society as a contest of subgroup identities rather than as a common home.

Together these failures have produced the vacuum in which, as McDermott puts it, antisemitism finds its home and where the want of a shared civic creed lets old enmities flourish in the absence of a common Australian loyalty.

This is the heart of the matter. As McDermott argues, we have simply stopped trying to encourage Australians to regard one another first as fellow citizens, as people bound by a common destiny and by mutual rights and obligations that are binding on all of us regardless of race or religion. The consequences of this deterioration of a common civic culture are visible in our schools and universities where antisemitic incidents have reached unprecedented heights.

For all that, however, this paper is not a counsel of despair. McDermott is

careful to acknowledge that successive governments, once having grasped the danger, acted on it. The civic alarm of the 1990s, sounded by Keating's Civics Expert Group and answered by the Howard government's Discovering Democracy program under the historian John Hirst, was a serious attempt to recover a unifying civic culture. Its failure to do so is not a refutation of the project; rather, it is part of McDermott's warning.

However, the recovery of a shared 'we' remains both possible and necessary. And it is here that McDermott's work meets a recurring finding of the broader research program: that law is only ever the perimeter fence. The true security of a minority lies in the culture within it. No statute can mandate the health and vitality of a culture; but it can be fostered by a serious civic education.

McDermott make a series of closing recommendations. He argues for a mandated national civics curriculum, the re-ritualising of the school week, and renewed engagement across school sectors that have become sealed off from one another. These proposals are concrete and demanding — and they are long overdue. How are we to live together? McDermott reminds us that the answer must be taught, generation by generation, or it is lost.

— **Peter Kurti**

**Director – Culture, Prosperity & Civil Society program**

**The Centre for Independent Studies**

# PROLOGUE

## The three-letter word

Crossing the road, heading towards the front door of the dilapidated warehouse which houses my office, I see it again. The building, converted from its original purpose as a furniture factory, is on Beaconsfield Avenue in Melbourne's inner north. Our bins form a disorderly line next to the front door, with Beaconsfield and street number written on their sides. At some point in the months after October 7, 2023, a passerby had pulled out a black, permanent marker and added a three-letter word beneath the Beaconsfield moniker — JEW.

Today, in the aftermath of the massacre at Bondi, catching sight of it again brings me up short. Someone has done their homework: Benjamin Disraeli, of course, latterly Lord Beaconsfield, one of the giants of modern British politics, was indeed Jewish.

Inner city, affluent and progressive Northcote, its nearby hipster High Street, voted the world's coolest street some two years ago (to the admitted puzzlement of locals), is hardly a redneck outpost, given to harbouring the Hansonite 'racism' which we have been informed is the greatest threat to Australian harmony. Yet here we are, where the word, the descriptor of a nationality, of a people,

itself constitutes an implicit pejorative. JEW. Nothing more, apparently, need be said.

I briefly contemplated the absurdity of counterfactuals: if this was Kant Street — Prussian, or Pole. Or Salisbury Road — Englishman. The basic obviousness of the blunt and poisonous assertion, the assumption guiding the deployment of Jew as three letter word, stands out starkly.

This tiny piece of graffiti serves for me as a pointer to the toxic civic corrosion we now confront. For the explosion — and casual acceptance — of antisemitism since October 7 points to the dangerous disintegration of the democracy of manners — the ingrained and widespread practice of treating each other as equals, regardless of differences in status or background — which has sustained our multi-ethnic experiment for well over a century. What is unfolding on our streets and public places is not merely a threat to one community — it is an assault on the foundations of Australia's democratic stability.

— Alex McDermott

# INTRODUCTION

## The educational architecture of 'we'

To understand the depth of this structural failure, we must establish precisely what is meant by, and what will be addressed under, the role of civics for the purposes of this paper. Civics is frequently reduced in contemporary commentary to a dry, perfunctory understanding of institutional machinery — the mechanical knowledge of how a bill becomes law or how preferential voting operates. In contrast, this paper treats civics as an active, cultural, and philosophical enterprise: the deliberate cultivation of a shared national identity and a common bond of membership that transcends individual differences.

The role of civics encompasses the entire institutional apparatus through which a liberal democracy inducts its young into this shared inheritance. Consequently, this analysis focuses attention on the intersection of four critical levers of national life:

- **National Education Policy:** The overarching intergovernmental declarations and agreements that establish the normative goals of Australian schooling.
- **School Curriculum Structures:** The structural frameworks mandated by national and state authorities, specifically examining how civics content is either prioritised or marginalised within the classroom.
- **Initial Teacher Education (ITE):** The academic and professional training of the teaching vanguard, evaluating their capacity to transmit constitutional literacy and liberal-democratic philosophy.
- **Public Institutions and Civic Associations:** The broader educational and cultural bodies that either reinforce centripetal national cohesion or accelerate centrifugal fragmentation.

This paper argues that the surge of performative hatred on our streets and university campuses is the predictable harvest of a long-term civic vacuum. By dismantling the historical narrative of common citizenship, our educational structures have left young Australians fundamentally unequipped to resist sectarian intimidation.

The investigation that follows unfolds across a defined historical and policy arc. Act 1 establishes the current parameters of the civic vacuum, pairing modern statistics with a critical analysis of current curriculum frameworks. Act 2 provides a major historical consolidation, tracing the 19th-century origins of our egalitarian culture — and the Jewish vanguard that helped forge the democracy of manners — into the early 20th-century institutionalisation of that ethos under the great educational reformers Frank Tate and Peter Board.

Act 3 charts the post-1960s centrifugal drift, where the progressive socialisation of the curriculum replaced historical *humanitas* and civic belonging with an amorphous focus on life adjustment. Act 4 evaluates the structural successes and systemic failures of the 1990s Discovering Democracy experiment. Finally, Act 5 outlines a comprehensive policy framework for Turning the Ship, proposing concrete, actionable recommendations to re-anchor Australian education in a robust, unashamedly militant democracy of manners.

# ACT ONE

## The first-person plural and the civic vacuum

*Political order ... depends upon the existence of a community that identifies itself as 'we'.*

— **Roger Scruton**, *The First-Person Plural, The Worth of Nations* (ed. Claudio Veliz, 1993), p. 82

Since October 2023, antisemitism has moved from the far fringes to the centre of our public life. This is the latest, most virulent phase of a drift that began with the First Gulf War in 1990, where aggressive Islamism and an increasingly illiberal left-wing intelligentsia began to form a *de facto* — and oftentimes explicit — alliance.<sup>1</sup>

Astonishingly, some query whether antisemitism is really that bad now. The claim is that the Bondi massacre was a generic terror attack, not necessarily motivated by anti-Jewishness, or that anti-Jewishness was objectively worse a century ago when Australia operated a racially targeted immigration program — the White Australia Policy — which excluded non-British Jews, and espoused a civic creed that acclaimed Britishness as intrinsic to its core values and culture.

But Bondi is a *both/and*, not an *either/or* scenario. A terror event is not the less so because antisemitism has explicitly formulated its actions and those it has chosen to target — namely, Jews, for being Jews, as they gathered to celebrate an annual festival.

Moreover, to argue that anti-Jewishness was objectively worse a century ago is to mistake yesterday's social friction for today's structural collapse. While the Australia of the early 20th century operated under the exclusionary lines of the White Australia Policy, it nonetheless maintained a mutual respect and basic civility of equals that functioned as a robust social shield.

Looking slightly later in our history, Peter Medding's surveys of the Melbourne

Jewish community show that, mid-century, acceptance was the norm for 80% of the community. Of those Jews who considered there was perceivable discrimination, a third considered it minor and generalised, and had never experienced it personally. About 1-in-5 had encountered prejudice personally.

Overwhelmingly, almost none considered it serious — only 2.5% of Jews regarded antisemitism as a serious general problem. Across the board the opinion was that although there were individual cases and incidents of discrimination in Australia, the problem was not serious at all and minor compared with that in Europe.<sup>2</sup>

Where prejudice did manifest, it was largely confined to the anonymous and unsavoury blackballing of elite clubs like The Melbourne or The Union, private golf clubs such as Royal Sydney, and service organisations like Rotary. The blackball allowed for the quiet violation of a social norm that the perpetrator would never have dared to breach in public, professional, or ordinary face-to-face interactions.

Contrast this with today, where antisemitism is not merely present but publicly paraded. Every day, vilification is chanted and screamed on university campuses, from the most intellectually self-regarding. It's hash-tagged and Instagrammed, virally distributed as a badge of moral superiority. We have moved from the quiet, private exclusion of the past to a culture of performative, public aggression — a culture of repudiation that views the democracy of manners not as a shield, but as a colonial relic to be trampled.

The bare statistics tell their own story: the 731% surge in incidents in the immediate wake of the October 7 Hamas-led pogrom was merely the preamble to what the United Nations Secretary-General described — and Australian special envoy to combat antisemitism Jillian Segal, in the aftermath of Bondi,

reaffirmed — as a sustained tsunami of hate.<sup>3</sup> The Executive Council of Australian Jewry (ECAJ) recorded 2,062 anti-Jewish incidents between October 2023 and September 2024 alone — quadruple the previous year — before the data spiked again following the firebombing of the Adass Israel Synagogue and the gutting of Lewis’s Continental Kitchen.<sup>4</sup>

This is the structural failure of our shared polity made visible. We see the corrosion when Jewish Australians begin pulling their children out of junior football teams to avoid targeted abuse. We see it in the violence and public shaming of people, their businesses, and their careers purely on the basis of ethnicity, religion, and cultural background. When a junior cricket team training at the nets in Camberwell requires six — six — police vans in attendance to ensure the safety of Jewish Australian boys, we are forced to conclude that it’s no longer simply a breakdown in civic manners with which we are contending.

This is happening only to one community in Australia right now. One of the most striking things preceding Bondi has been the relative silence of many of our key institutions. Alongside universities, this has been most apparent in the arts sector — the only sector of the entire Australian community which remained strangely mute when practically every other group joined the demands that the Albanese government accede to public outcry and call a Royal Commission into Bondi and its causes. That silence was a shameful reflection on the entire arts establishment.

The entrenched bias — and abject moral cowardice — that now permeates our cultural heartland, allied with the militant takeover of university campuses and the systematic targeting of Jewish staff and students, stands as an indictment of the very intelligent opinion that claims normative authority. When some citizens are treated as civic strangers, the identity of the entire citizenry is degraded, and ultimately poisoned.

Simultaneously, we are witnessing a collapse of Australian civic knowledge, that is, of the knowledge of what it

means to be Australian. That collapse is the latest stage of a civic knowledge crisis that policymakers had already identified by the early 1990s.<sup>5</sup> As the final part of this paper shows, at the same time that anti-Jewish attacks began to spike in the First Gulf War, civics surveys were reporting profoundly alarming levels of ignorance about the most elementary essentials of what the Renaissance Humanists called the art of living together. Now the numbers are even worse. The most recent National Assessment Program Civics and Citizenship results confirm that only 28% of Year 10 students meet basic proficiency — the worst result since testing began in 2004.<sup>6</sup>

Worse than simple civic ignorance, however, is the long-term institutional drift within the national curriculum itself. For the past three to four decades, educational frameworks have steadily replaced the narrative of a shared common ground with a systematic focus on the politics of identity.

Rather than anchoring citizenship in the universal rights of the individual, current curriculum structures — most visibly under the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) Version 9 — increasingly frame civic participation through the lens of collective subgroup belonging — despite the Rule of law being directly mentioned in AC9HC7K03, as well as the key principles and features of the Australian legal system, including the Australian Constitution.

This institutional preference is reinforced by cross-curriculum priorities that universalise identity lenses across all subjects while siloing core constitutional concepts, such as the Rule of Law and the Westminster system, into niche electives. The predictable result of this pedagogical pivot is a progressive illiberalism that trains young Australians to view their society through the prism of fragmented power relations rather than a shared civic inheritance.<sup>7</sup>

This cuts against the core of our civic identity: the fact that we are all Australian citizens, deserving of the

same amount of respect, and that this is our primary identity in Australian life. The disintegration of any sense of common, shared identity — the bond of membership we all share — is especially pernicious in an advanced liberal democracy.

In the 19th and for most of the 20th centuries this was intuitively understood, where diversity was not a self-evident virtue demanding compulsory embrace but a social reality to be managed in such a way that the polity did not disintegrate.

The bulk of cultural and institutional work was devoted to finding ways to ensure we could find common ground while continuing to live and act as autonomous people.<sup>8</sup> Free lives lived together require a unifying commitment vastly more so than unfree ones. Celebrate difference and diversity purely for its own sake, and the vehicle we all travel in together first cracks, and then shatters. Yet we have moved from a baseline of tolerance — which, for all its lack of enthusiasm, even grudgingness, can be almost universally wide — to an enforced celebration of difference that few can genuinely sustain and that is therefore self-defeating.

This shift is exacerbated by a comms-tech digital revolution that has dramatically altered our systems of affect, expression and community-making. Not only can people express themselves more freely — and behind the veil of anonymity, more viciously — than ever before; they are much more able to disappear down their own algorithmic rabbit holes than was previously possible. Migrant communities can remain wholly embedded in media from their home countries, meaning they

can be physically located in Lakemba but still living in Beirut in a way which was literally inconceivable prior to this revolution.<sup>9</sup>

Against this, everything that follows is predicated on the primacy of the pre-contractual “we” — the shared inheritance that Scruton identifies as the only ground upon which a nation of strangers can stand.<sup>10</sup> Across several specific historical epochs, we will trace the rise, fall, and potential restoration of this experiment.

We will begin with a wider process as well which they were part of, the colonial project of shared civic identity which saw the institutionalisation of democratic mutual recognition across a whole people, featuring a Jewish vanguard of the 19th century who helped forge the democracy of manners. We will move to the ‘Temple of National Greatness’ established by the educational reformers Frank Tate and Peter Board in the first decades of the 20th century, who brought the nation-building civic liberalism of Federation into the classroom. We will then chart the Centrifugal Drift of the 1970s and 80s, where life adjustment replaced historical *humanitas*, and evaluate the 1990s Discovering Democracy experiment.

Finally, we will propose a framework for Turning the Ship — a militant democracy that reasserts the pre-contractual bond of membership; a ‘we’ that serves as the necessary ground for our shared peace, where individual freedoms are able to flourish precisely because that civic bedrock of the sovereign ‘we’ has been both asserted, recognised and defended.

# ACT TWO

## Forging the first-person plural

### **The Democracy of Manners and the Civic Liberal Vanguard: 1830s–1890s**

It is a short, 20-minute drive from Bondi Pavilion to the Great Synagogue in Sydney's CBD. The drive is worth making if you want to understand the great Australian experiment on which the murderous attack of Sunday, 14 December 2025 was a direct assault.

A little over 150 years ago, Sydney's Great Synagogue, opposite Hyde Park, began to be built. It was the result of the Jewish community's reunification, after it had divided into two congregations in the 1850s. A reunited congregation wouldn't fit into either existing buildings, so a new site was bought, and community fund-raising began in earnest. They sold land they'd previously been granted to build a school, and held a major bazaar in Martin Place.

Inside the Great Synagogue, in its museum, is displayed the arch of one of its two predecessors, the York Street Synagogue, the building to which the liberal Governor of New South Wales, Sir Richard Bourke, personally contributed money.

The significance of this personal act is worthy of consideration. It was Bourke's 1836 Church Act that established individuals' freedom to pursue their religion. The Act, which ended an official preference for the Anglican Church over other faiths, marked colonial New South Wales — established as a penal depot less than 50 years prior — as one of the more remarkable liberal projects in the world.

Bourke's "determined, even ruthless" advocacy of a polity which insisted that all citizens should be equal before the law, whatever their religion and whether or not they had once been convicts, was now matched by legislation unthinkable in Britain.<sup>11</sup>

There, the political order was reflected

by the Anglican Church's status as the official religious institution guiding the state.

In Australia, however, no unassailably dominant creed existed for government to support. From the earliest days of settlement, a high proportion of Irish Catholics lived integrated throughout the community rather than contained in urban ghettos or separate social strata. Coupled with the strong prominence of Dissenting Protestant sects — Wesleyan, Congregationalist, Baptist, and Presbyterian — this demographic reality precluded any single church from asserting exclusive spiritual or civic authority.

Under Bourke's new legislation all Christian sects would receive state aid according to how many adherents they could claim. Precedence in street processions and civic festivities, whenever some order had to be followed, went by the same rule.

This was extremely bold, given the centuries of mutual loathing, violence and hostile legislation that had marked relations between not only Catholics and Protestants, but Establishment Anglicanism and Dissenters throughout Britain. It is why Bourke is celebrated — insofar as he is remembered — as the liberal, reforming governor.

Yet it may be asked, with no apologies to the antisemitic zealots who inundated the steps of Sydney Opera House in the days immediately after the October 7 2023 Hamas-led pogrom: where are the Jews? The Jews, too, are here.

Governor Bourke intended to include practitioners of the Jewish faith in the ambit of equal claim to state aid. This proved too much for Whitehall to swallow. Jews who had not converted to Christianity, after all, were still barred from membership of Parliament. Bourke's policy ambition was already well ahead of standard procedure. Although momentum for expanding toleration

was evident in Britain, beginning with nonconformist Dissenting Protestant sects, then leaping the large hurdle of Catholic Emancipation in 1829, full toleration of Jews in public life was still some decades away.

Equality in state aid for Jews in colonial Australia had to wait. But not for long. During the 1840s and 50s in the different colonies of NSW, South Australia and Victoria state aid was extended to Jewish religion, colonial Australia again proving a liberal vanguard.

That in 1833, Bourke made a personal donation of £10 (a not inconsiderable sum in those days) to the building fund for the York Street Synagogue (the predecessor to The Great Synagogue), demonstrates an earnest commitment to the cause of religious equality.

There were many other non-Jews who contributed, seeing the synagogue as a civic ornament to a rising city, as well as a prodigious amount of heavy lifting from the Jewish community and philanthropic connections to cover the eventual, enormous sum of £3,500 to construct in the early 1840s.

Bourke made his donation just two years after landing in the colony, setting the tone for the inclusive religious policies he would later attempt to formalise through the 1836 Church Act. The synagogue's opening and consecration in April 1844 was a major event in Sydney, and drew a large crowd of the curious and the well-wishing. *The Australian* reported:

"When we consider the comparatively small number of the Jewish body who are residing in the colony, we must award them the very highest praise for their unwearied zeal, and their firm determination to remember the vow which David swore ... I will not give sleep to mine eyes ... until I have found a place for the Lord."<sup>12</sup>

The original Torah Ark (Aron Kodesh) from the York Street Synagogue on display in the AM Rosenblum Jewish Museum within the Great Synagogue complex is an artifact of the great Australian achievement: building a polity of tolerance between people, and

peoples, of different origins.

Bourke's achievement was to help originate the political and legal frameworks of Australia's liberal democracy. But Australia, John Hirst reminds us, was culturally democratic before it was politically democratic. The practice of treating people of unlike background or status as if they were your equal, had taken root even before Bourke's reforms.<sup>13</sup>

In Australia, the most bizarre evidence of an antipodean, upside-down-turned world was not climate, or strange flora and fauna, but the commingling of different peoples and sects who, if they had previously known each other, did so purely to hate one another. Here, though, colleagues, fellow club-members, drinking partners, neighbours and spouses were peoples of traditionally warring backgrounds — Catholics and Protestant; Irishman, Englishman and Jew — depended on minimising differences, concentrating instead on shared values and pursuits — the commonly shared identity above the particularised differences which set colonial Australians apart from each other.

This is the origin of Australia's basically friendly, if at times undiscerning egalitarian culture, by which people of all sorts of backgrounds have managed to get along. The success of Australian Jews in this matrix is the first authentic proofs we have that this was a social creed which was not inherently limited to the British.

The Jewish influxes to Australia in the 19th century came from Germany and eastern Europe as well as Britain. They came frequently as Russian refugees from Tsar-sponsored pogroms. Less in number than those choosing to travel to the nearer refuges of the United States and Britain, they felt themselves at an extreme remove from the Jewish European world they had left behind them.

At the other end of the world, with a shortage of marriageable Jewish women, they had no choice but to exert

themselves outwardly in the society in which they found themselves in.<sup>14</sup> Their success was evident in the prominence Jews played in colonial public life for the rest of the century.

The same month Governor Bourke publicly declared his donation to the York Street Synagogue project, December 1833, saw the arrival of a Jewish English convict and his family, whose son was to play a signal role in the next great watershed — establishing civic liberalism in Australian schools — through the 1872 Victorian Education Act, which established free, secular and compulsory education for all school-aged children, and was the exemplar subsequently followed by other colonies.

Edward Cohen, the son of a London merchant, arrived with his mother and siblings 10 days before the *Sydney Gazette* announced Bourke's donation. Edward's father, Henry Simeon Cohen, his wife Elizabeth and their children soon became central to the life of Australia's nascent Jewish community, the presence of a family bolstering a community of what had to that point been predominantly individual men transported for various offences.<sup>15</sup>

Edward, 11-years on arrival, spent the rest of his youth and early adulthood managing his father's wholesale grocery firm, before joining his brother in Melbourne as auctioneer, eventually forming a partnership with Scottish businessmen Alexander Fraser. His activities in the gold rush city's community life were as prominent as his business — first as councillor and alderman, then in 1862-63 as Melbourne's mayor.<sup>16</sup>

Active in the Melbourne Hebrew Congregation, he was one of three petitioners to Earl Grey for state aid to the Jewish religion on what Geulah Solomon called the grounds of equal citizenship, common loyalty and equal rights with other denominations.<sup>17</sup> It's somewhat remarkable, then, given the multi-decadal, trans-generational nature of that campaign for state aid, that from the moment he was elected to Victoria's Parliament in 1865 he sought state

aid's abolition — to the consternation of many in his Jewish Victorian community. Critically, he considered it contributed to colonial divisiveness and anti-national sentiment, having become persuaded that the state involving itself in the institutional lives of different sects and groups was deleterious to a free society.

## **The Democratic Plunge and the Brotherhood of Citizens**

We come, then, to the foundational moment of Australia's civic unity. The sudden, unexpected onset of mass suffrage colonial democracy in the 1850s brought a whole new set of previously unposed questions into view.

Mass suffrage, the great "leap in the dark" the Australian colonies led, meant, as London parliamentarian Robert Lowe sardonically noted, "we must educate our masters," the mass of newly enfranchised ordinary men.<sup>18</sup>

In Victoria, radical progressive Liberal, ex-Cambridge don Charles Pearson observed that democratic institutions such as our own make compulsory education a necessity. To him it was obvious that "in a country like our own, where the highest offices of the State are open not merely in name but in fact to all, it is necessary that there should be no chance of uninstructed constituencies returning ignorant representatives."<sup>19</sup>

England had solved the problem its own way, with 1870 legislation providing for schooling for all children. But in Australia it was imperative that it be done in such a way as to not only protect but further extend the democracy of manners which had been painstakingly built up in the colonial periphery.

England's 1870 legislation mimicked the class distinctions which stratified the society. Common schools would be built for charity cases. Only the children of the very poor, those who couldn't afford any other schooling. That could not do for a national vision of a shared common ground above everything.

George Higinbotham, the champion of colonial liberal reform who led the 1866

Royal Commission on Education, was clear: "We should make our schools not common schools in the sense [of providing] a common education for common people – but schools to all classes of the community."<sup>20</sup>

Attorney-General J.W. Stephen, introducing the revolutionary new Education Act in 1872, presented legislation which would become the template for all Australia's colonies (and internationally). Acknowledging a fundamental citizenship right to education, but making clear that this education would not be allowed to stratify citizens. Here the student would be educated not at a charity school as in England but "as one of the advantages from living in a free country where all cooperate in supplying the common necessities."<sup>21</sup>

British-born educationist and politician Charles Pearson articulated the ideal that the new nation's children would "sit on the same bench and have together all the associations of boyhood, and should learn under such circumstances to respect and love each other."<sup>22</sup>

Author and researcher Bob Birrell describes the uncompromising nature of their reform cause as essentially civic: "They wanted to create a brotherhood of citizens."<sup>23</sup> It was the democratic state's obligation, Higinbotham insisted, "to enable every man to understand the duties of life, as an individual member of a larger community."<sup>24</sup>

Cohen's speech in Victorian Parliament in support of the 1872 legislation, little more than a month before Cornwall architect Thomas Rowe won the competition to design Sydney's Grand Synagogue, was an attempt to persuade not just his own electoral constituency and the Jewish community, but the wider public of the need to embrace this reform.

"This being a new and free country let us leave behind us all the superstitious nonsense of the old world," he said. "Let us send our children to the same schools, irrespective of creed or country; and let them here be brought up in that creed

of kindness and friendship which will make them forget that their creeds divide them".<sup>25</sup>

This is the approach historian Stuart Macintyre describes, whereby the colonial common culture asserted itself and worked to liberate the newly arrived citizen from the confines of their sectional allegiances.<sup>26</sup> *The Age* declared "the whole tendency of modern liberalism ... is to strengthen the power of the state and the spirit of nationality and to crush out 'particularism' of any kind."<sup>27</sup> The great enemy of "division" was not to be allowed any purchase.

A virtuous circle was created between Australia's democratic politics and its democratic culture, both reinforcing and protecting each other. Tensions there undoubtedly were – the failure to encompass Catholic schooling in a broader, civics friendly rubric laid down ethno-sectarian troubles which future decades would harvest all too unhappily – but tensions are inherent to any free society. Yet the tensions were never allowed to overwhelm the common desire to find common ground.

This great achievement featured the Jews prominently. The high proportion of Australian Jews in public life, their prominence in all the main areas of cultural, economic, political and social life, was commented on by colonial visitors at the end of the 19th century.<sup>28</sup> The achievements of Australian-born Jews in national life — producing the greatest General in Australian history (John Monash), the first Australian-born Governor-General (Isaac Isaacs) — are the crest of a larger wave of highly-successful integration.

## **Nationhood and the Making of the Liberal Civic Sacred: 1901-1950s**

National cohesion and shared commitment to liberal nationhood were paramount in the minds of the educational reformers who formulated the first true Civics curricula initiatives at the beginning of the 20th Century. The beginning of the new century, and the inauguration of the Australian

Commonwealth in 1901, opened new vistas and opportunities. Federation was widely proclaimed as a great triumph of civic virtue, whereby all Australians united by putting aside their parochial interests in order to found a nation more liberal and democratic than any national constitution had previously managed.

It was therefore only natural for educational reform to put civics at the heart of schooling. "Education reform," Frank Tate insisted in 1901, "was the natural corollary to Federation".<sup>29</sup> Tate wished "to make the primary school vital, to train the child in habits of thought, to inculcate a sense of obligation to society, and duty to his country."<sup>30</sup>

The grandeur of the civic architecture which many of the state schools had been built to express grew out of the civic idealism of the foundational reformers, but subsequent decades of drought, economic bust and concomitant class war (Great Strikes of 1890s, birth of ALP as a class-specific political party) had eroded this passionate commitment into sectional dealing and widening cynicism.

Tate's evidence at the 1899 Royal Commission attracted attention and in February 1902 he took on the role of Director of Education in Victoria. To this pioneering role, he brought a crusading intensity forged during his own rise through the ranks from a pupil-teacher on the Castlemaine goldfields to a school inspector.

Having spent his early career fighting the rigidities of rote memorisation and mechanical testing, Tate was determined to reform classroom instruction from a self-protective grind into an induction into a shared national ethos. In this role he prosecuted a vision of universal education which combined commitment to the new education movement gaining prominence in Britain and the USA with a fundamentally Australian commitment to liberal citizenship.<sup>31</sup>

Peter Board's background was similar to Tate's. A decade older, grown to maturity attending schools run by his teacher father, he too rose up through

the ranks. Given command of the NSW Education system in the early 1900s, he was appointed to a committee to draw up a syllabus for primary schools, known colloquially thereafter as "Board's syllabus."<sup>32</sup>

Like Tate, Board ensured that state-controlled education was relentlessly focused on civic patriotism and emergent nationhood. As part of this project, he was at pains to emphasise the need to think outside of one's immediate identity for the civic good. Whereas recent educational reform has preoccupied itself with entrenching different identities, Board said the style of education most acutely needed was "one that will counteract the tendency of the individual to let the social group to which he belongs do his thinking for him".<sup>33</sup>

Tate's 1902 and 1905 designed courses gave civics and history dramatic new prominence for the two final years of primary school education.<sup>34</sup> Grade Five students focused on the deep roots of Australian citizenship, extending back to Magna Carta, while Grade Six students continued to learn "How the Wish of the People Becomes Law" and "How the Laws are Carried Out" with an overlay of study to understand the development of Australian governments and "The Duties of a Citizen".<sup>35</sup>

Textbooks fused the lessons of historic roots, civic purpose and shared national identity. "We are born free; but we would not have been born free if it had not been for the struggles and labours of others," Walter Murdoch stated simply in a key schoolroom text, *The Australian Citizen*, underscoring the obligation incurred by virtue of being born into a free nation.<sup>36</sup>

The intellectual architecture of this new civics was perhaps most clearly escalated in Murdoch's 1903 work, *The Struggle for Freedom: Lessons in English History*.<sup>37</sup> Produced as part of the Austral History Readers series, to be read by Grade Six students, Murdoch's text provided a narrative that positioned the Australian Commonwealth as the culmination of a centuries-long contest for liberty.

Beginning with the Old English kingdoms and the Norman Conquest, Murdoch traced the struggle between Parliament and the Crown and the evolution of the party system, eventually landing squarely in the antipodean present. By the final chapters, the student was led from the Magna Carta to the Constitution of an Australian State and the Australian Commonwealth, framing the local experience as the inheritor of a global liberal tradition.<sup>38</sup> (The current Australian Curriculum offers a telling contrast: the Magna Carta is restricted to mentions in the optional elaborations in various locations across Years 6, 7 and 8.)

Central to Murdoch's project was the definition of public spirit and the duties of a citizen. Under section titles such as "What we owe to the State: peace, comfort, security" and "How to discharge the debt", Murdoch impressed upon the student that citizenship was far more than a reciprocal contract.<sup>39</sup>

Instead, it was what Roger Scruton subsequently described as a bond of membership—that web of non-contractual obligations and piety that links parents to children. This bond transcends elective choice; even for those who choose to join the polity, what is chosen is precisely not a defeasible agreement, but a deeper inheritance whose obligations and privileges transcend any mere legal contract.<sup>40</sup>

By teaching that a nation, and the nation's state is ultimately what its individuals make of it, Murdoch provided the pedagogical foundation for the brotherhood of citizens envisioned by Tate and Board.

When government was viewed not as an abstract authority but the making of rules for people living together in a society, and the enforcement of those rules, what emerged was an education intended to ensure a lifelong commitment to the common necessities of a free country.

Education was, said Board, a "distinctly national purpose", where individual progress was "interwoven with the progress of the nation ... as a nation", a process achieved by consciously

transforming the pupil into a "citizen of the State" who understood that civic rights were inseparable from civic duties.<sup>41</sup>

Tate and Board's contribution to the Australian democracy of manners was to codify it into a patriotic citizenship that built on the more foundational aims of numerate literacy in the colonial era toward a high civic ideal.

Writing in 2003 of Tate and Board's "quest for civic virtue", Jeremy Sammut described this movement as a progressive, liberal nationalist cause designed to ensure that the practice of Australian citizenship consisted of a "greater political and civic content related to higher ideals of nation- and citizen-building."<sup>42</sup> At its heart was a rejection of what Tate called the "purely personal and selfish point of view" in favour of a "developed public spirit" where the "best actions of life are those which consist in public usefulness and social service".<sup>43</sup>

The new textbooks, school readers, and a monthly School Paper reigned supreme until the 1930s, sustaining a high moral and literary tone in combination with a strong sense of Australian nationalism. Reading these materials today one is struck by the degree to which imperial patriotism and the recounting of deeds of courage to inspire emulation meshed with a stronger and developing sense of Australian identity, and the profoundly civic underlay which made it all cohere, providing a common conceptual vocabulary Australians across the political spectrum could draw upon.

Tate was in no doubt of the efficacy of the new approach. He considered it combined better teaching techniques, the move away from rigid rote learning and a profound emphasis on what we could call the politics of belonging. He allowed that the new approach might have meant children absorbed fewer dates and dynasties than 10 or 20 years previously, "but the pupils today have a better idea of the movements which gave us our present-day freedom and the teaching is better designed to make them useful citizens."<sup>44</sup>

Board and Tate's new education ensured that the school became what Jewish Australian Isaac Isaacs, future High Court judge and Governor-General called "the very cornerstone of the Temple of National greatness".<sup>45</sup> This brotherhood of citizens was the primary shield for the Jewish community. So long as the 'we' of the nation remained the primary identity, the 'they' of sectarian hatred found no institutional oxygen.

### **Civic Resilience and the Commonwealth Ethos: 1920s–1950s**

Yet no greater period of civic discord in Australia's 20th century exists outside of the period which immediately followed, when students were being educated to largely identical civics curricula and textbooks. The 1920s and 30s are rife with the social aggression, class animosity, political dysfunction and even the potential threat of revolutionary or civil war attendant on civil chaos.

The ALP split upon ethno-religious as well as ideological lines, mirroring wider social discords produced by the Irish Civil War and the rise of revolutionary communism. The Great Depression destroyed optimism, expectations and lives. Liberalism was in retreat — no major party even featured the word in its name in the interwar period — and democracy itself seemed to many an outmoded, 19th century relic alongside the shiny, new, gleamingly modern authoritarian alternatives of communism and fascism.

The lesson is that civics curriculum, and the education we give our children, never exists in a vacuum. It is one rudder, one engine, powering the ship of the nation. It will never achieve everything. And yet, in the face of such serious headwinds, the counter-movements serve as significant pointers to us today of what is possible even in unsympathetic political circumstances.

It was the Robert Menzies generation which came of age in the aftermath of the Great War, and began a movement of civic nationalism, as part of his ginger group, the Young Nationalists, as the

Great Depression loomed.<sup>46</sup>

This was the generation which formed the backbone of the All for Australia movement in the early 1930s, repudiating the failure of both political sides to rise above divisive, sectional politics. It eventually became the United Australia Party (again, the name tells,) led by ex-Labor minister Joseph Lyons, which Menzies helped broker before moving from Victorian to federal politics.

Historians have neglected the civic dimension of this movement, and this national response — which numbered grassroots involvement and membership of ordinary Australians in their tens of thousands — describing it instead as a more purely political response. Yet the rhetoric of the common ground proved the great Australian triumph as other nations lurched into prolonged civil violence, anarchy, revolt and revolution.<sup>47</sup>

The ethos inculcated in classrooms for the first decades of the century is clearly echoed in this movement for political unity, mutual sacrifice, shared identity, and basic civic decency in the 1930s.

Subsequently this was reinforced daily through the secular liturgies of the classroom: the systematic dissemination of flags to every school, and the weekly flag ceremonies where students lined up to renew their pledge of allegiance to God, King, Nation, and the laws. This regular, visceral ritual anchored the democracy of manners in the physical life of the child, establishing a baseline of mutual recognition that survived the fracturing pressures of class and ethno-sectarian warfare.

This background proved decisive in laying the foundations for the post-war era of high prosperity and extraordinarily powerful social cohesion. Those who steered the nation through these transformations had been, when it came to civic ethos, exceedingly well-schooled. The Citizenship Conventions for adults in these years were a Menzies government initiative, but the definitive articulation of this generational consensus occurred during the Golden Jubilee of Federation in 1951.

The Jubilee was explicitly designed as a genuine national stocktaking which directly acknowledged the debt the living owed to the national founders. In stark contrast to contemporary, low-key, almost embarrassed, milestone civic commemorations, the 1951 celebrations were a massive, grassroots phenomenon. Driven by a specific prime ministerial instruction that the events must not be monopolised by Commonwealth Government directives but instead driven by a broad cross-section of the people, the entire nation was brought into a collective ritual of membership.

On the 9 May 1951, a national holiday turned the public's attention entirely to the civic contract. More than 200,000 people crowded into King William Street in Adelaide to watch a Jubilee Cavalcade, while Darwin's celebrations began with a 21-gun salute at dawn. In Canberra, cyclically organised relay riders arrived from locations as remote as Cairns and Darwin to deliver pledge cards declaring loyalty, pride, and national gratitude signed by more than two million school children, trade unionists, church groups, and sporting bodies.<sup>48</sup>

Critically, this national celebration was anchored inside the schoolhouse.

Local committees organised events that presented Jubilee Flags to every school, Jubilee Medals to every primary student, and a commemorative booklet to secondary school students across the continent. In the foreword written specifically "To the Schoolchildren of Australia" in that handbook, Robert Menzies emphasised the gratitude due towards "the fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters of those who read these pages", who "helped us win through" against the severest trials — two global wars and a Great Depression — which the decades since Federation had brought, before directly ushering the rising generation into this ongoing conversation: "I am confident that our young people will carry on the traditions of citizenship which have done so much to give Australia a proud history."<sup>49</sup>

The 1951 generation understood what our own era has forgotten: that a forward-facing focus (celebrating the growth of industry, commerce, and technology which marked their era) requires no reflexive repudiation of the past, and, moreover, that the house of citizenship cannot stand if the incoming tenants choose to burn the inheritance. It is to the emergence of our own era to which we shall now turn.

# ACT THREE

## Centrifugal Drift: 1960s-1980s

The transition from the 1950s to the late 1980s describes a decades-long, slow-motion hollowing out of the Australian civic core. If the era of Tate and Board was defined by a centripetal force — pulling diverse individuals toward a shared national centre — the subsequent decades were defined by a centrifugal one.

This was not a sudden collapse but a progressive socialisation of the curriculum, replacing the rigorous study of institutions, and clear affirmation of common belonging, with an amorphous focus on life adjustment. The brotherhood of citizens began to dissolve into a collection of civic strangers, in a process that has directly facilitated the civic vacuum we inhabit today.

An emergent Social Studies movement was being advocated as early as 1940, when L.J. Pryor, lecturer in History at Frank Tate's old Melbourne Teachers' College, began to agitate for reform. According to this movement, the purpose of schooling was not to teach particular subjects such as Geography, Civics, or History, but to socialise the child. Education was now recast as a process of "life adjustment."<sup>50</sup>

The subjects previously taught individually were absorbed by Social Studies, whose goal was to gear the child to join the increasingly complicated world of contemporary life. This shift was a fundamental change in the relationship between the state and the student. The school was no longer Isaac Isaacs' temple of national greatness so much as a laboratory for social engineering.

The 1960s were marked by a very strong movement to develop courses in social sciences. Stuart Macintyre described the teaching of civics and citizenship in the 1950s and 60s as a process combining both "narrowing and dispersion of focus."<sup>51</sup> Civics teaching lost the exhortatory verve of its high liberal patriotism. Instead, it became more strictly technical, utilitarian and perfunctorily descriptive, as the subject

was absorbed into a wider social studies curriculum.

This change was symbolised by the abandonment, across all states in the late 1960s and early 1970s, of the school flag ceremony and vows, derided by Macintyre as "that pivotal patriarchal symbol" where students lined up to renew allegiance to "God, crown, parents, teachers and the laws."

Macintyre had no doubt that the ritual had become "patently unsuited to changed structures of authority."<sup>52</sup> Yet the regular flag ceremony provided a physical anchor for the democracy of manners. Could it not have been revised in language and tonality whilst still retaining a core assertion of mutual civic recognition and shared democratic identity? The hollowing out of the school assembly rituals meant the surrender of the secular liberal liturgy that had once defined the Australian school.

As Alan Barcan observed, the primary goal of the Social Studies movement was to socialise children — to make them well-adjusted — rather than to educate them.<sup>53</sup> He saw this as a move away from the liberal education model championed by Frank Tate and Peter Board, trading humanitas for a shallow sense of social utility. The triumph of SOSE — the Studies of Society and Environment — in the national curriculum from the late 1980s signals the death knell of serious schooling for civitas.

Now History, Geography, Economics and Politics were mulched, mixed and blended into "Time, Continuity and Change", "Natural and Social systems" and other offerings. A teacher who had the year previously been teaching European settlement and colonial society now found him or herself tasked with teaching instead "SOSE: Surf Culture".<sup>54</sup>

Increasingly education choices adopted "problem-based" learning approaches where the civics curriculum would engage students at the critical and reflective level, rather than building

vital knowledge or a sense of common ownership, inheritance and belonging. This abdication of any committed teaching of civics gains context from the shift in intellectual conversation around it. From the 1980s onward, Australian curriculum theory increasingly incorporated critical pedagogy, critical social inquiry, the examination of power relations and a preoccupation with social justice frameworks.

Teacher-education faculties from the 1970s, especially those devoted to Social Studies, were heavily influenced by the sociology of education, critical theory and neo-Marxist educational analysis. These view the curriculum as a suspect vehicle in need of radical critique and "deconstruction", lest it reproduce further inequality and privilege.<sup>55</sup>

Educational sociologists such as D. Alexander and D. Prideaux began to frame "Citizenship Education as Ideology Transmission." Citizenship was now recast as a malign force that instils "behaviours that support the status quo". Better instead to encourage direct reflection on power relations.<sup>56</sup>

The key concepts to learn, from Grades 1 and 2, Alexander and Prideaux suggested, should instead be "Decision" and "Power and Authority".<sup>57</sup> By teaching students to view society only as a series of power relations, any active engagement with the liberal civic tradition of Australian citizenship as a distinctively egalitarian project of shared freedoms became literally unthinkable. Moreover, the curriculum inadvertently lay the groundwork for the re-emergence of the ancient trope of Jewish power.

A properly reshaped civics curriculum, they argued, should attack the "liberal tenets" previously central — equal opportunity, competition, neutrality, impartiality "and predictable meritocracy." Citizenship education should be converted into "political education"—a shift toward training students for direct participation in decision-making processes.<sup>58</sup> Needless to say, this broader, more amorphous remit left the classroom highly vulnerable to ideologically aggressive capture.

Focus on the common ground of shared

nationhood and its historical roots was not so much non-existent as anathema. The past's dominant role was to provide evidence of previous "persecution, discrimination or exploitation" of people on the basis, "for example, of race or sex".

In their 1988 text *Mistaken Identity*, Stephen Castles, Mary Kalantzis and others posed the thorny question of how "ethnic pluralism" can resolve itself with social cohesiveness. They argued that Australia could no longer be defined according to its "ethnic identity", which was now taken to include historical and cultural traditions and language. The existential conundrum seemed now inescapable, for how are core values and acceptable behavioural forms to be laid down, if "the dominance of Anglo-Australian culture" is no longer accepted?<sup>59</sup>

Notice how civic nationhood has here, by the Bicentennial celebration, warped and mutated into "Anglo-Australian culture". Most crucially of all however, "the history of white racism and genocide against the Aborigines must", the reformers insisted, "become a central theme of education and public debate, and an accommodation with the Aborigines must be achieved..."<sup>60</sup>

Those who are looking to trace the lineage of current-day sensibilities, where publicly-funded academics airily frame Australia as not only racialised but systemically racially oppressive, can only acknowledge the success of the ideology of educators and sociologists which first achieved institutional ascendancy four decades previous.

Alan Barcan argued that the hollowing out of the curriculum went far deeper than a mere forgetting of the technicalities of government: it represented a fundamental assault on the intellectual and moral equipment of the future citizen.

He critiqued the life adjustment trap — that narrow obsession with adult-relevant knowledge, from surf culture to local council disputes — as a pedagogical dead-end that deprived students of the historical dimension needed to understand why their institutions exist

at all. By focusing only on the immediate and the problematic, the curriculum enacted a dispersion of focus where the coherent story of the nation was lost.<sup>61</sup>

Yet Barcan saw a more sinister outcome than simple ignorance. He identified the 1980s focus on Power and Authority in primary schools as a form of progressive illiberalism. This was not education in the liberal sense, but an invitation to cynicism; it taught students to see the world as a series of power relations to be critiqued rather than a civic inheritance to be understood and maintained.

The result was a profound atrophy of civic consciousness, where the student was left with the tools of a critic but no factual content to actually criticise, and no sense of belonging to the system they were encouraged to reform. To Barcan, the shift from *humanitas* to socialisation meant that schools were no longer preparing children to enter a shared political community, but were instead stranding them in a fragmented present, stripped of the chronological and thematic coherence required for true historical understanding.<sup>62</sup>

What students had left was passion, an energetically evangelistic moral vocabulary, but little actual civic knowledge of the nature of the liberal democracy in which they live — its mechanics, processes, institutions, cultural codes and ideals — and close to zero historical sense. The result is what Stuart Macintyre acknowledged as an increasing gulf of civic ignorance. He identifies a real problem in the mismatch between young people's ethical capacity and their civic incapacity. This alienation, a "crippling deficiency," became the new normal.<sup>63</sup>

Macintyre however, even as he vigorously beat off Barcan's criticisms, was making equally heavy weather against stiff resistance from educators who questioned whether civic knowledge was even necessary at all.<sup>64</sup> In a decade defined by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the apparent global triumph of liberal democratic norms, there was a pervasive assumption that social cohesion was a self-sustaining perpetual motion machine — an assumption reinforced by the fact

that Australia had been marked in the Menzies era by a remarkable degree of social cohesion, despite vast changes in its social and ethnic composition.

This complacency made for a greater degree of trash-talking of social cohesion as intrusive state indoctrination. The unconscious assumption underpinning much of the debate was that the centripetal forces of the nation were baked in and required no further maintenance. The challenge was not to defend the common ground, but to let divergence and difference fully flourish in an increasingly borderless world.<sup>65</sup>

The guiding assumption had become that young Australians are now "more cosmopolitan than an older generation can imagine, more connected to a global community of instant communication and digestible information and less willing to adopt attitudes limited by nationalism, xenophobia and cultural intolerance."<sup>66</sup>

Secure in the belief that the 'Australian Experiment' had reached a final, stable equilibrium, educators and policy-makers viewed the historical inheritance of the democracy of manners as a relic to be moved past rather than a hard-won achievement to be actively renewed. Taking for granted the enduring fact of social cohesion, they embraced a centrifugal democracy, oblivious to the reality that a polity unable to defend its own norms and mores is living on the rapidly exhausting social capital accumulated by previous generations.

As we move into the final acts of this paper, we confront the reality that the slow-motion collapse of civic consciousness was not accidental. It was the result of a deliberate intellectual pivot away from the shared heritage of citizens toward a fragmented pluralism that treats shared civic identity as a threat to individual authenticity. Antisemitism finds its home in this vacuum, where the lack of a shared civic creed allows old enmities to flourish in the absence of a common Australian loyalty. The project of the 1990s, to rediscover the democracy that unites us, was a necessary reaction to this hollowing out. The promise of its scope, the deep civic literacy of its materials and its ultimate failure throws into stark relief the work yet to be done.

## ACT FOUR

### The Discovering Democracy experiment 1990s-2000s

The 1990s began with the sound of civic alarm bells. The crippling deficiency identified by Stuart Macintyre's Civics Expert Group (CEG) had become impossible to ignore, backed by empirical data that painted a bleak picture of the national consciousness. A survey conducted for the CEG, *Civics and Citizenship: A Report of a National Survey of Public Knowledge of Australian Government and Citizenship (1994)* indicated that only 18% of Australians had some understanding of the contents of the Constitution, while a mere 40% could correctly name the two houses of Federal Parliament.<sup>67</sup>

More damningly, a 1994 Australian Bureau of Statistics survey found that only 19% of students in the final years of schooling could identify the role of the Governor-General. This was not merely a lapse in trivia; it was the documented evidence of a black hole of civic knowledge at the heart of the rising generation.

In response to this void, the Keating government commissioned the landmark CEG report, *Whereas the People...*, which argued for a massive reinvestment in the civic literacy of the nation. It sought to transform the classroom into a site of "active social reform", where the curriculum was a tool for social justice and a means to address historical power imbalances. Their proposed model prioritised a "pedagogy of participation", encouraging students to engage in community action and protest as a way to navigate a pluralistic society.<sup>68</sup>

However, the arrival of the Howard government in 1996 marked a fundamental pivot. The new Education Minister, David Kemp — a former professor of political science who had authored the "World-Class Schools" section of the 1991 *Fightback!* program — inherited a project he believed was misaligned with the requirements of a stable liberal democracy. Kemp immediately enacted a significant new departure from the Keating-era model.

He moved to replace what he viewed as a preoccupation with social justice and process-based active citizenship with a robust, institutional, and historically grounded liberal nationalism.<sup>69</sup>

Kemp understood that this was not merely a curriculum update but a high-stakes civic intervention. He viewed the deficit as a direct threat to the very efficacy and legitimacy of the Australian system. Rebranding the initiative as *Discovering Democracy*, Kemp sought to restore the map of our democracy.

During a 1997 Senate debate, the depth of this policy shift was made explicit: "This program is not about political indoctrination ... it is a response to the alarming fact that three-quarters of our young people do not know the role of the Governor-General or the function of the Constitution. We are restoring the map of our democracy".<sup>70</sup>

To lead this restoration, Kemp appointed John Hirst as the new chair of the *Discovering Democracy Materials Committee* in May 1996. It was a calculated, strategic choice. Hirst was a known republican, a leading organisational figure in the *Republic Movement* advocating for a referendum on the issue — so perhaps unlikely to be the instinctive first choice of avowed monarchist, Prime Minister John Howard.

Yet Hirst was a professional historian of such standing that no one disputed his objectivity. Kemp knew, also, that a figure like Geoffrey Blainey, who had already invested so much public-spirited energy questioning many of the social policy taboos of the political class, would be pilloried as too partisan. Hirst provided the intellectual shield necessary to build the genuine civics program Kemp prioritised, rather than a contested national curriculum.<sup>71</sup>

Hirst's task was not small. It was to reinvent, after a decades-long hiatus, a curriculum built on four key pillars: "Who Rules?" (Sovereignty and the individual);

“Law and Rights” (The Rule of Law); “The Australian Nation” (Shared history and identity); and “Citizens and Public Life” (Active, respectful participation).<sup>72</sup>

To make this possible a new foundational literature was urgent. Hirst’s primer for teachers, *Discovering Democracy: A Guide to Government and Law in Australia* (1998), and his landmark *Australia’s Democracy: A Short History* (2002) were designed to fill a void that had existed since the days Walter Murdoch’s *The Struggle for Freedom* had ceased to be used in classrooms and gone out of print.

*Australia’s Democracy* remains arguably the best single-volume political and civic history of Australia written in the past half century. Eschewing dry, abstracted descriptions and detail, it explores the way the democracy of manners first began and was subsequently formalised into a unique political settlement. He traces the evolution of the Australian ethos from a penal depot to a liberal vanguard, arguing that our institutions were shaped by a specific, “egalitarian conviviality” that sought to neutralise the sectarian enmities of the Old World.

He demonstrated that the Australian ‘fair go’ was a civic requirement for social harmony — a way for a diverse people to live together by ignoring difference rather than obsessing over it. On this base, the Australian Commonwealth is described as a deliberate, successful experiment in liberal nationhood, predicated on the idea that the state exists to protect a common citizenship that transcends individual identity.<sup>73</sup>

In *Australia’s Democracy*, Hirst teased out the liberal, universalist, democratic ethos in all its distinctively Australian cultural traits: never simply a gift from Westminster but a domestic achievement forged in the practical necessity of getting along.

The book’s first half provides a narrative history to the present day, while the second half comprises a series of thematic essays featuring topics such as Nation, Dignity, Citizens, Soldiers, Schools, Equality, and Distinctions<sup>74</sup>. By structuring the work this way, Hirst

provided a deep intellectual resource for upper high school and tertiary students and their educators, ensuring that the institutional map Kemp wished to restore was grounded in a lived, cultural reality rather than a strictly formal code of civics.

Tellingly for policy-makers today considering how to feature the Holocaust in our contemporary curriculum, the unit “A Democracy Destroyed” used the collapse of the Weimar Republic to show how democratic safeguards could be systematically dismantled from within.

Students were tasked with examining the 1933 Enabling Act — the legal mechanism by which the German parliament effectively voted away its own power. What emerges is a provocative case study in how a civic vacuum allows for the rise of state terror. To humanise this collapse, the reader included Martin Niemöller’s poem *First They Came*, framing the Holocaust as the ultimate proof of what happens when the Common Ground is abandoned.<sup>75</sup>

The curriculum asked students to consider the vulnerability engendered by acquiescence silence and the individual responsibility of the citizen to guard the arena of the Rule of Law. Literature and poetry, such as Anna Seghers’ *The Seventh Cross*, were used to demonstrate that when the democratic safety net is replaced by state intimidation, everyone—not just the initial targets—becomes vulnerable.<sup>76</sup>

The series was designed to be provocative, asking students to consider if similar cracks could appear in the Australian system if civic participation and the rule of law were not maintained. It aimed to transform the student into a civically and politically literate citizen who understood that their rights were inseparable from their duties.

However, the Discovering Democracy experiment collided with the entrenched ideological resistance of an educational establishment that had spent almost 30 years steeped in a pedagogy of socialisation and active citizenship. To many teachers, Kemp’s reintroduction of institutional knowledge clearly seemed

like state-sponsored indoctrination or atavistic nationalism.

The 1999 Erebus Consulting Group evaluation confirmed a total cleavage of worldview, noting that while the kits reached almost every school, they frequently “languished in libraries”.<sup>77</sup> While some teachers honestly admitted they lacked the intellectual equipment to engage with the content, and others cited a curriculum already spread a mile wide and an inch thin, these practical complaints often masked a deeper hostility. This was captured in feedback typical of the period, where one curriculum officer dismissed the project as providing a “traditional, linear, and male-dominated view of political power that does not reflect the diverse experiences of our students”.<sup>78</sup>

This was a strikingly ideological response — falsified by the actual material generated and on offer — that revealed a profound failure of culture rather than logistics. Even when presented with a vast range of diverse narratives, many teachers and educational theorists took umbrage at the materials’ suggestion that shared citizenship should be our primary identity.

As the *Teachers Talking Civics* (2003) report noted, Victorian educators were particularly conflicted about how to convey “the value of being different” or “the importance of questioning uniformity” when the materials offered a unified national story. Their preference for school-level rules and subjective “attitude formation” over a deep understanding of national institutions and shared ethos highlighted the narrow mental horizon their training had provided.<sup>79</sup>

The resistance was strengthened by professional associations like the Australian Curriculum Studies Association (ACSA), which rejected what they termed a “deficit model” of factual knowledge, pushing instead for a “dynamic pedagogy” of community action and protest. At the 1997 Australian Federation of Societies for Studies of Society and Environment (AFSSSE) conference, critics balked at removing Social Studies modules on Surf Culture

to make room for the knowledge-focused federal turn to civic identity.<sup>80</sup>

Teachers who had spent their careers framing the nation as a white, racialised status quo found it impossible to adopt a curriculum that positioned the Australian Commonwealth as the inheritor of a global liberal tradition. They had been socialised to prioritise the child’s adjustment to a cosmopolitan, pluralistic world over their induction into a shared political community, making the very idea of common ground seem anathema.

Alan Barcan, who had vigorously contested Macintyre’s earlier recommendations of teaching Civics, confessed himself entirely unsurprised by this hostility. He argued that because the kits focused on Scruton’s “affirmative we” and the democracy of manners, they were rejected by a profession that saw any unified narrative as a form of state indoctrination.<sup>81</sup>

Kemp’s new departure was intended to arrest the decline in civic knowledge, but it struggled against a gatekeeper class — doubtless exacerbated by standard federal-state discord — that viewed any unified national story as exclusionary. The reality was that the materials did not fit the Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE) program, which favoured civic “dispositions” over knowledge “outcomes.”

The Discovering Democracy experiment highlighted a fundamental lesson: the architecture of the Commonwealth can provide the resources, the training, and the high-calibre historical narrative, but it cannot, on its own, force a profession to teach a creed it has been trained to distrust.

The paradox is that part of the reason for the disappearance of civics education into the maw of Social Studies is precisely because there had been so little conflict in the 1950s and 60s. Despite the acute political differences between left and right, Australian democracy functioned remarkably smoothly across these decades. And the era was characterised by significant consensus over what Australia was and was aspiring to become.

The New Left progressives who began emerging from the suddenly multiplying university campuses in the 1960s reviled this consensus. This newly-educated, white-collar professional cohort helped drive a shift in the public conversation, where the moral vocabulary moved from citizenship and responsibility to the social justice evangelism of later decades, in which "citizenship" was replaced by "human rights."<sup>82</sup>

This was the bitter harvest for Australia's wider civic culture, which made the avowedly non-partisan civic identity approach Kemp and Hirst tried to foster seem such a strange and hostile language to so many stakeholders.

Exacerbating these trends was the complacency of democratic liberalism in the 1990s. Its arch-nemesis, totalitarian communism had finally been defeated. The Berlin Wall had come down. The 'evil empire' of Soviet Russia collapsed. It all seemed to inaugurate an 'End of History' in which liberal globalism was now wholly triumphant, and worldwide.

Reading the language 30 years later, what strikes you most forcibly is the assumption that the relatively benign environment produced by a globally-connected world was an unalterable reality, the final fixture. Viewed from the 2020s, the belief that information's communication is neutral and not prone to weaponisation is especially startling.

Combined, these factors meant social cohesion was assumed to be equally permanent and relatively uncomplicated. The foundational rubric of common codes of behaviour being —albeit unconsciously — viewed as solidly in place, the challenge for most commentators, educators and advisers became how best to let divergence and difference fully flourish.

Unwittingly the centrifugal forces of democracy were being added to, and

the unifying, centripetal forces assumed to be a convenient, unalterable feature of the polity. While the majority of the intellectual class celebrated the 'End of History', they were in fact presiding over the end of the very civic literacy required to sustain history's most successful democratic experiment.

Over the two decades that followed, this elite complacency allowed a gatekeeper class to quietly codify the fragmented, grievance-based models of the old SOSE curriculum into the permanent administrative machinery of national education.<sup>83</sup> The structural hollowing out was complete, and the bureaucratic framework that followed cemented this fragmentation.<sup>84</sup>

This process of centrifugal fragmentation is reflected in ACARA Version 9, where the Civics and Citizenship curriculum includes descriptors such as AC9HC8K05, which asks students to examine "how culture and religion may influence individuals' and groups' perceptions and expressions of citizenship and their actions as citizens".

The accompanying elaborations direct students to explore "different aspects of their personal identity through membership of multiple communities" and the "collective identities of several different groups in Australia's multicultural society".<sup>85</sup>

By framing citizenship primarily through the lens of belonging to an identity subgroup rather than a shared national community, the curriculum actively trains the next generation to evaluate each other in terms of their differences. The vacuum was ready to be filled. The antisemitic explosion which followed was not designed, but was facilitated by a Civics process and philosophy which had so entirely abdicated its obligation to deepen understanding and knowledge of our common civic identity.

# ACT FIVE

## Turning the ship: 2020s and Beyond

*Together Under One Flag.*

— **Bumper sticker, Bittern Market, Victoria, Sunday 1 March 2026**

I had been thinking about multiculturalism while walking the dog in a large loop across the paddocks that surrounded the Sunday morning market which had popped up in the car park of Bittern Station when I was brought up short by a simple bumper sticker on a vendor's car: *Together Under One Flag*. It was what Samuel L. Jackson's immortal character Jules in *Pulp Fiction* refers to as a "moment of clarity". In four words, it captured the exact centripetal force our current institutional and pedagogical culture lacks.

We must acknowledge that the shifts required now are not small. Turning the ship is a whole-of-nation exercise. It requires a robust public debate that confronts everything obscuring our path as a successful, multi-ethnic, unified liberal democracy.

For 50 years, our core national policies—however well-meaning—have overseen and facilitated the steady disintegration of our civic polity. We have moved from a democracy of manners, where we lived together by minimising our differences and emphasising points of commonality, to a compulsory enthusiasm for those differences. The result is a society where the bonds of membership have been replaced by competing claims for recognition.

Antisemitism is the clearest, most visceral expression of this collapse. It is a symptom of a nation that has forgotten how to speak the language of a shared home—a language the major political parties have been unable or unwilling to articulate for more than a decade. To change course, we must be bold enough to challenge the sacred cows of contemporary social policy.

Multiculturalism, like Indigenous Self-Determination, has become as beloved

and sacred a term as White Australia once was for the pre-World War II consensus. If we are to survive, we must be willing to fundamentally alter or overturn these pillars in favour of a unified civic identity.

Identity comes from choice, from inheritance, and from other sources. We live with that, each lifetime a more or less difficult struggle to find its proper balance between the fixed and fluid components of the autonomous human self. We have, in recent decades, gotten too much into the habit of taking one sole factor, one element of identity, and making it literally existential, where to question it is to destroy one's status as an agent.

Moreover, under the doctrine of multiculturalism, the state has taken on the role of recognising group identity claims and actively encouraging people to think about themselves this way. The state is taking an extremely fluid situation and treating it with extreme fixity. It has been celebrated as one of the great triumphs of modern liberalism, yet its predilection for treating people according to group hyphens and subcategories fatally undermines the freedom of cultural expression it was originally designed to encourage and protect.

When Governor Bourke personally funded the York Street Synagogue in 1833, he did so to assert that Jewishness was a strand within the Australian weave, not a tear in it. Today, that weave is being unpicked. Where Bourke used the state to signal equality, the modern state — through ACARA Version 9 and other baleful instruments — signals a fragmented particularism that facilitates a culture where the Jewish citizen becomes a civic stranger.

When it comes to articulating a unified, civic, shared identity, multiculturalism, despite its best defenders' wishes and best intentions, also finds itself fatally handicapped. As Donald Horne observed

in *Teaching Young Australians to be Australian Citizens* (1994), the doctrine of multiculturalism “gives no clue about unity. Instead, it takes for granted the existence of a unity that the embrace of diversity is supposed to build upon and be in counterbalance against”.<sup>86</sup>

That assumption no longer holds. Instead, we have rebadged the hard-won tolerance of the 19th and early 20th centuries as a modern achievement, while simultaneously pursuing social policies that act as accelerants to its destruction. The eruption of antisemitism since the October 7 Hamas pogrom and the subsequent 2025 Bondi attack is the culminating point of this systemic failure.

Suzanne Rutland identifies the 1990–1991 Gulf War as the definitive turning point on the road towards this breakdown. It initiated a period where aggressive Islamism, fuelled by extremist materials in local Arabic-language newspapers, began to describe Jews as the underlying cause of all wars.

Rutland notes that figures such as Sheikh Taj Eldine El-Hilaly were articulating these views as early as 1988 at the University of Sydney, where he explicitly referred to Jews as the “cancer” of the human race. This visceral rhetoric was further amplified during the conflict when a local Arabic-language magazine published a cover depicting a Jewish star over a map of Australia, accompanied by the headline: “The Zionist threat is here”.<sup>87</sup>

This was mirrored by a left-wing intelligentsia and an increasingly illiberal arts sector that sought to initiate boycotts of the Jewish state under the guise of political discourse. By the time of the 2000 Intifada and the September 11 attacks, Islamist hostility was echoed and amplified by academics who singled out Israel while steadfastly ignoring far more egregious global human rights abuses.

This demonisation has flourished because our civic vocabulary has been erased, replaced by Nazi analogies that delegitimise Jewish presence in Australia.

Which brings us to the core problem of the cannibals and the liberals. As Steven

Lukes argues, a liberal society that insists on absolute neutrality toward those who wish to destroy it is like a host inviting cannibals to dinner and being surprised when they decide the host shall be the main course.<sup>88</sup> We need a robust national liberalism — a militant democracy — that is unafraid to exclude the cannibals from the table.<sup>89</sup>

While recent analysis has focused on the legislative failures and the limits of hate speech laws in curbing the tsunami of hate, legislation can only ever be the perimeter fence. The true security of a minority lies in the democracy of manners that exists within the fence—a culture that no law can mandate, but which a proper civics education once successfully grew.

One of the great ironies of Australian life is that the great civic virtue which multiculturalism claims — tolerance of difference — was not the invention of multiculturalism, but of the preceding order. There were, nonetheless, trends that seemed to undermine the great process of mingling and meshing, at least when viewed superficially — trends from which the Jewish community has not been exempt.

Beginning in the 1950s, and growing ever since, a return to Jewish schooling, in contrast to the Cohen and Isaacs mission, has become increasingly apparent. Whereas only a small minority of Jewish children attended day schools in the immediate post-war decades, by the 2020s around three quarters of Australian Jews aged 18–29 had attended Jewish secondary schools, with attendance rates in Melbourne and Sydney reaching approximately 76–80 per cent. This points to a profound transformation in Jewish educational patterns over the second half of the 20th century and into the 21st.<sup>90</sup>

The trend is, in part, simply an indication of the general movement in Australia toward non-state schooling, beginning from the Menzies government reversing the policy of a century to allow government funding to go to non-state, religious schools with the 1963 science laboratories grants. Dissatisfaction

with the quality of education in state schools, combined with rising affluence, encouraged a remarkable expansion of the independent schooling sector.

Chiefly, however, it is the result of a seeming paradox: the success of the multi-ethnic Australian project in the decades preceding multiculturalism. Social and economic openness allowed Jewish Australians — including many who had survived the Holocaust — to flourish.

As a result, the community became so well established that it could now afford to fund its own denominational schools, and they began to match, or even surpass, other denominational sectors. That each form of Jewish practice—progressive, liberal reformist, Orthodox, and others—sought out its own school accentuated the trend.

But there was an additional factor. The very success of Jewish integration had produced a new threat — of being entirely absorbed into a world where Jewishness would be swamped. The absence of antisemitism in any meaningful sense actually fuelled the demand for Jewish education as a way of preserving and enhancing the vitality of the Jewish tradition and its vast cultural and historical inheritance.

This is the paradox of successful integration — and it doesn't simply apply to the Jewish community. It points to and exemplifies some of the tensions internal to different communities in a liberal, egalitarian nation, looking to both engage and participate fully in the wider surrounding life while maintaining traditions and practices individual to themselves.

Enforcing all school students into state schools today is not only wildly impractical and unlikely to increase education standards — given the benefits of educational competition between providers — but would be profoundly illiberal. The growth of independent schooling is no bad thing. Variety of education for different children and different families should and could be one of the great glories of modern liberal democracy. Yet the horror of uniformity

need not force us to abandon unity. It does mean, however, that a nation-wide civics curriculum is even more vital, to ensure that this plethora of difference occupies and shares the common ground of liberal nationhood.

The problem is that we have stopped trying to encourage people to treat each other as Australian citizens ahead of our other respective layers of identity. We have lost the preoccupation — obsession even — of our earlier national tradition, of ensuring we treat each other as people with whom we share a common destiny and have common and mutual rights and obligations to uphold, regardless of race or religion. And the results are obvious even within schools — not to mention universities — with the incidence of antisemitic incidents, particularly in state schools, reaching unprecedented heights.

Deprived of what Abraham Lincoln described as a shared “political religion”, the current generation cannot differentiate between the legitimate exercise of free speech and the sectarian intimidation currently manifesting as antisemitism. We are living again in what Lincoln described in his 1838 Lyceum Address as an “after-age of democracy”. Speaking in the weeks following a public lynching, Lincoln warned that once the living memorials of the founding generation have faded, the deep-rooted human passions of hatred and revenge will take over unless they are checked by a “political religion”.

Lincoln's answer was an energetic, even militant cultivation of democratic civics:

“Let it be taught in schools, in seminaries, and in colleges; let it be written in Primers, spelling books, and in Almanacs; let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice. And, in short, let it become the political religion of the nation; and let the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the grave and the gay, of all sexes and tongues, and colours and conditions, sacrifice unceasingly upon its altars”.<sup>91</sup>

To cure the current pathology, we too must implement a series of robust,

practical pathways that move beyond the passive liberalism of the past fifty years, restoring the conviction that citizenship is a high calling involving duties and sacrifices as an expression of our bond of membership. In a darker and more illiberal age than the decades preceding it, we must adopt a Militant Democracy that is unafraid to assert its values — a democracy that not only teaches but demands fealty to the Rule of Law and ritualises our commitment to each other as equals.

Our civic intervention needs to be systemic. It requires stripping the reflexive particularism and group identity reductivism out of the national curriculum, replacing it with an emphasis on the bond of membership which Australia's democratic citizenship promises to those who genuinely embrace its creed and practices.

ACARA Version 10 should look to replace the focus on diverse perceptions of citizenship with the primacy of the individual under the Rule of Law, and the extended, variegated historical story — dating back past Magna Carta to the Greek, Roman, and Judaeo-Christian traditions, where the story of Australia's democratic experiment authentically begins. Long term, civics teachers must have a thorough learning in both the knowledge rubrics and the authentically liberal democratic philosophy which

undergirds Australian citizenship. As this story is grounded in history, civics teachers require adequate history training as well, one divorced from the identity preoccupations which have come to dominate the field.

Australia's liberal democracy has thrived best over its 170 years as a pluralist network of civic associations, some of which are actual associations, not always dealing with the same types of people. The nation has emerged through these different, often only partially overlapping, groups where one learns about rubbing up against each other, learning how to live together and tolerate each other in the process.

Once that process collapses the centrifugal forces become overwhelming. It's difficult to imagine any creedal commitments and high ideals filling that void on their own. A liberal democracy requires, then, bonds that are thin and flexible enough to allow for individual freedom, yet bonds that are simultaneously made of some brand of civic steel so they cannot be snapped by the centrifugal forces of a free society.<sup>92</sup> Achieving that balance is a matter of not just months or years but of solid decades of focused, deliberate, and sustained effort.

Under one flag, together, we can begin.

# Recommendations

Outside of revisioning the civics curriculum itself and the competencies its teachers will need to master, specific, targeted reforms can buttress this framework:

## Category A:

### Structural Governance and Curriculum Mechanics

- **A mandated, genuine, national civics curriculum:** To arrest decades of centrifugal fragmentation, the Commonwealth must exercise its ultimate intergovernmental leverage by conditioning federal education funding on the strict adoption of a mandatory, standalone, nationwide Civics program. The need for this has been acknowledged by a recent Senate inquiry into civics education. This curriculum must explicitly rescue Australian history from the silo of Humanities electives, re-embedding it into the deep, centuries-long historical arc of political struggles and civil achievements — extending from Greco-Roman and Judaeo-Christian philosophy through Magna Carta and the evolution of Westminster — out of which the Australian democratic settlement grew.
- **Carrot and stick policies that activate federalism’s potential:** The obstacle to change is not the existence of federalism, but the historical refusal to use its mechanisms effectively. The solution lies not in direct centralisation, but in a combination of carrot and stick policies that activate federalism’s competitive potential. Because the states exercise autonomous jurisdictional freedoms, variable content and practice have become the norm across the compulsory years of schooling, culminating in a total absence of mandatory civics education in Years 11 and 12. If the Commonwealth is serious about facilitating real change, it must stop treating social cohesion as a passive byproduct and deploy genuine fiscal leverage to ensure Civics decay is reversed. State jurisdictions that refuse to implement this framework, or choose to dilute it via local ‘adopt and adapt’ provisions, should face the immediate withholding of federal schooling grants. This constitutes the stick. The carrot comes via activating the possibilities of competitive federalism, whereby those states which do hit key Civics curricula and teaching metrics are well rewarded.
- **Re-ritualising School Week:** The school week must begin with an overt civic ritual that anchors the child in a shared identity as an Australian citizen. This involves the reintroduction of a weekly flag ceremony and a standard pledge of civic fealty. This structural intervention is designed to establish a psychological resilience around our foundational democratic ideals. In this way it can be reinforced by the physical architecture of learning, requiring the permanent display of the ‘Australian Compact’ — a transparent, document-backed charter outlining core liberal-democratic freedoms — in every classroom.
- **Schools as incubators of democratic debate:** Democracy, Geoffrey Blainey memorably tells us, “is government by debate”. Drawing on the December 2024 Centre for Independent Studies briefing paper The argument for debate, by Deidre Clary and Fiona Mueller, the curriculum should implement mandatory monthly debating and annual speech competitions across the compulsory years of schooling. Fostering rigorous debate over contested political and historical topics provides the essential intellectual training wheels required for articulate, confident civic engagement, teaching students to critique arguments rather than demonize opponents.

## Category B:

### Cross-Sectoral and Experiential Youth Formation

- **Mandating cross-sectoral co-curricular engagement:** To address the growing isolation of expanding independent and denominational school sectors — as evidenced by the 65-70% Jewish day school enrolment footprint — national policy must introduce structural incentives for cross-sectoral engagement. State authorities should mandate regular co-curricular forums, mock parliaments, and speech competitions that bring state, Catholic, and independent school cohorts together. These joint forums can create thin but flexible cross-sectoral bonds, preventing distinct student populations from developing insulated, parallel civic realities.
- **The experiential model of character and nation-building:** To build the civic resilience and social capital required to withstand modern centrifugal pressures, policymakers should look outside traditional classroom walls to structured youth formation frameworks. As Warren Bishop and Fiona Mueller argue in the April 2026 Page Research Centre report, *Building character and the nation: ADF lessons for young Australians*, organisations like the Australian Defence Force Cadets offer a powerful template for forming civic habits. By adapting these community-based development models into a mandatory, non-military, school-age community service program, education authorities can place young Australians from disparate socio-economic and cultural backgrounds into environments built on mutual accountability, discipline, and a conscious commitment to the wider community.
- **Holocaust and integrated civics education:** Holocaust curriculum content must be robustly integrated into a broader civics framework that explicitly uses the 1930s collapse of the Weimar Republic to illustrate the fragility of the Rule of Law as part of a wider Civics teaching curriculum suggested in this paper. Crucially, the teaching framework of Holocaust education must reject globalist, detached educational strategies that rely on international bodies like UNESCO, which run the risk of flattening localised democratic realities. Instead, it must be deeply localised and historically grounded, explicitly neutralising a lachrymose view of minority history by celebrating the domestic success story of multi-ethnic integration into the Commonwealth. The curriculum must balance historical warnings of state terror and civic disintegration with the proud national legacies of prominent Australian minorities — such as General Sir John Monash — to demonstrate that a robust democracy of manners successfully encompasses distinctive cultural traditions when a shared civic commitment remains the sovereign bond.

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This paper treats civics as an active, cultural, and philosophical enterprise: the deliberate cultivation of a shared national identity and a common bond of membership that transcends individual differences. The role of civics encompasses the entire institutional apparatus through which a liberal democracy inducts its young into this shared inheritance. The author argues that the surge of performative hatred on our streets and university campuses is the predictable harvest of a long-term civic vacuum. By dismantling the historical narrative of common citizenship, our educational structures have left young Australians textually and philosophically unequipped to resist sectarian intimidation, he says, and offers a set of recommendations to correct the problem.

## About the author



Alex McDermott is a historian and a fellow at the Robert Menzies Institute. A public historian since 2005, he has worked as historian, producer, research scholar and consultant on a variety of projects in television, academic research and mainstream publishing. He has provided historical expertise for a range of organisations - Screen Australia, State Library Victoria, La Trobe University, ABC, Channel 7, SBS, Australian Unity and the Museum of Australian Democracy. Author of *Australian History for Dummies* (John Wiley & Son, 2011), he is a frequent contributor to *The Australian* and *The Australian Financial Review*.

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Analysis Paper 108( AP108) • ISSN: 2209-3753 (Online) 2209-3745 (Print) • ISBN: 978-1-923462-53-3  
Published April 2026 by the Centre for Independent Studies Limited. Views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Centre's staff, advisors, directors or officers.  
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