Diverting the flak

The response of the New Zealand Department of Education to curriculum controversy

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This article examines the way the former New Zealand Department of Education dealt with controversial curriculum issues. Two case studies are presented, both centring on the social studies curriculum. The first case study examines the controversy surrounding the release of the Departmental school bulletin Washday at the Pa in 1964. The second case study considers the circumstances surrounding the importation into New Zealand of the program 'Man: A Course of Study' (MACOS) during the late 1970s. It is argued that in both these examples the Department attempted to respond to public criticism by utilising a strategy best described as 'informed disinterest'. Informed disinterest involved a measured response from senior departmental officials, thereby allowing the bureaucracy to convey an image of reasoned, scientific liberalism, as opposed to the uninformed accusations of critics. While the first case study illustrates the limitations of this strategy in the face of political pressure, the second case study provides evidence of a department willing and able to engage with critics in defence of programs it considered to be educationally justified and politically sustainable.

From the mid-1940s until its demise in 1989 the New Zealand Department of Education attempted to counter public criticism of education utilising a strategy best described as 'informed disinterest'. In this particular context, informed disinterest typically consisted of a measured and authoritative response from senior Departmental officials. This response allowed the bureaucracy to present a public image of reasonableness, directly informed by scientific and liberal educational principles, in which the critics could be portrayed as somewhat shrill impediments to progress.

The two case studies presented in this article illustrate both the limitations and the potentialities of this strategy. During the early 1960s the release of the innovative school bulletin Washday at the Pa was accompanied by considerable controversy. Attempts by senior Department officials to respond to criticism with informed disinterest, however, were rapidly overtaken by the politics of race relations. During the late 1970s, education was once again the focus of controversy. The importation of the MACOS program into New Zealand at a time when a new social studies syllabus was being launched sparked
bitter opposition from moral groups. In turn this provoked a response from the education bureaucracy that epitomised informed disinterest at its most successful.

CASE STUDY ONE — THE DEPARTMENT AT BAY

In the years following World War Two, the New Zealand state education system struggled to cope with an increasingly diverse clientele. Stimulated by the 1937 New Education Fellowship Conferences' brief New Zealand sojourn, the publication of the Thomas Report (1943), and the support of senior Department officers under the guidance of the Director of Education, C.E. Beeby, new teaching methods began to make their presence felt. Schools were being increasingly regarded as miniature social systems, with citizenship education playing a key role in 'repairing' society (McGee 1998, p.48). As a new curriculum subject, social studies provided the focal point of citizenship education for democracy, and the vehicle for innovative teaching methods emphasising active student participation.

Throughout the early postwar years, parental groups, employers and academics, supported by influential dailies such as the New Zealand Herald, criticised the Department for failing to maintain academic standards. Years later W.L. Renwick, then Assistant Director General of Education, revealed the extent of the pressure felt by Beeby and his senior Department officers (Renwick 1973). In attempting to counter such criticism, the Department employed several variations of informed disinterest. One response was to emphasise the educational and social value of the changes while depicting critics as outdated and uninformed. In 1947, for example, members of a special education committee set up by the Dunedin Chamber of Commerce who had been highly critical of academic standards in schools were admonished for recalling 'their own school days through a haze of memory of conditions and accomplishments which in large part never existed' (Hanna 1947, p.25).

Beeby and other Department officers also sought to persuade parents and employers that New Zealand had largely avoided the wastage and injustice of the more selective English system, which consigned students to particular types of secondary school on the basis of national test scores (Beeby 1958, pp.5-6). Moreover, in national and international publications Beeby described the Department's role as one of adjudication between sectional viewpoints. In April 1956, for instance, Beeby sent the final version of an article he had prepared on New Zealand education to the International Review of Education. In a covering letter to the editor, Dr H. Reimers, he observed that the nation's main educational problem was, 'how to balance the claims of the University and the Department of Education to influence the curricula of schools that are now so very different from the ones whose courses were naturally all attuned to the demands of the University' (Beeby 1956). During these early postwar years extensive files filled with clippings from contemporary newspapers and replies to critics were built up, greatly adding to an institutional memory concerning responses to controversial matters.

The Department was particularly anxious to project an image of an educational bureaucracy and a teaching profession in complete accord. In April 1957 an internal departmental memo strongly rejected newspaper claims that many teachers were uneasy with the educational reforms:

> The charge has been made that the Department is forcing the newer methods on unwilling teachers. This has now been emphatically denied by representatives of the teachers themselves, particularly by Mr E.F. Davidson, retiring President of the North Canterbury Branch of the New Zealand Educational Institute, in the address reported in both the Christchurch newspapers on 23 March. Mr Davidson makes it clear that the professional officers of the Department fully recognise that teachers are entitled to a wide measure of freedom to select the methods that suit them best. Indeed, it has been one of the chief objectives of Departmental policy in recent years to extend the professional freedom of teachers. Linked with this, there has been a remarkable growth of consultation with teachers on a wide range of professional matters. Decisions on syllabuses, for example, are now in large degree decisions of the profession as a whole and not merely of the Department. (New Zealand Department of Education 1957)

Criticism nevertheless continued unabated. As a further counter to this activity, Department inspectors working in association with the New Zealand Council for Educational Research tested the academic skills of New Zealand students, comparing them with data from earlier times and with performances overseas. When the results were released they largely supported the Department's position (McLaren 1974, pp.43-45). Many parents and employers remained unconvinced, however, and further pressure resulted in the setting up of the Currie Commission in February 1960. The Commission's report, published in July 1962, likewise largely supported the general direction of postwar curriculum reform, while depicting critics as a largely ill-informed, irreconcilable minority (Currie Report 1962, pp.30-31). The report also illustrates that the Department was responding to criticism with informed disinterest. In fact, as a recent PhD thesis by D.J. Scott has shown, far from being a neutral body the Commission was 'a structural mechanism', designed to support the Department's agenda and to uphold the dominant 'policy community' of the day (Scott 1996, p.330). In New Zealand this community was small and tightly knit, providing effective cement for the postwar educational settlement (Oxenhaw 1995).

The Department, however, was soon to be reminded that the environment within which educational decisions were made was changing. In the aftermath of the report's release, substantially revised curriculum documents prepared by Department officers began to appear. Among them was a series of handbooks entitled Suggestions for the Teaching of Social Studies in the Primary School 1962. The Suggestions stressed that social studies aimed at 'Clear thinking about social problems', 'intelligent and responsible behaviour in social situations', and 'developing an intelligent and sympathetic interest in the various peoples, communities and cultures of the world' (New Zealand Department of Education 1962, pp.7-8).

The new syllabus attracted critical comment from a number of university academics and secondary teachers who felt that, by advocating social engineering at the expense of academic integrity, social studies undermined history and geography (Stone 1963, pp.27-
29; Gorrie 1963, pp.17-23). Although the relative handicap of being confined to a few academic and professional journals tended to blunt the political impact of such criticism, their warnings were to be, in one sense at least, prophetic. The 1962 Suggestions had indeed broken new ground in social studies and citizenship education by incorporating a substantial section on contemporary New Zealand life under the theme ‘How Families Live’. A series of school bulletins was planned as resource material for schools and the first of these, published in early 1964, dealt with a ‘typical’ Maori family. Entitled Washday at the Pa, this initial bulletin was profusely illustrated with photographs by Dutch-born New Zealand naturalised photographer, Ans Westra. Westra had worked with Maori people on the East Coast and subsequently published a number of articles on Maori life in well-respected national journals such as Te Ao Hou (Chief Inspector of Primary Schools 1964).

The controversy that broke out over Washday was not only the result of this new interest in indigenous case study material for social studies, but also of rapidly changing demographics within New Zealand society. By the early 1960s Maori urban drift, with its associated problems of poverty and breakdown of traditional life, had been under way for more than a decade. An important consequence of this for New Zealand society as a whole was that cultural identity became an increasingly contested issue. Maori traditional lifestyles were frequently idealised in glossy tourist brochures, but Pakeha identity as ‘the best of British’ was dependant on virtual Maori exclusion from affluent suburbia (Brookes 1997, pp.234-244). While successive New Zealand governments actively promoted a view of harmonious race relations to the world, Maori commentators increasingly pointed to racism and sub-standard accommodation (Brookes 1997, p.246). Under the circumstances, graphic portrayals of contemporary Maori urban life, especially where a student readership was involved, were almost bound to result in controversy. Somewhat surprisingly, the Washday manuscript does not appear to have been read by Department officers prior to publication. The photos and text outline, however, were apparently shown to the Secretary of Maori Affairs, who expressed ‘some qualms because of the living conditions shown’. Despite the Secretary’s concern, some 37,000 copies of Washday were subsequently printed and dispatched to public primary schools during May and June of 1964 (Chief Inspector of Primary Schools 1964).

The Maori Women’s Welfare League was to play a pivotal role in subsequent developments. Officially founded in 1951, the League had actively lobbied to improve housing and to combat negative stereotyping of Maori. In July 1964 the League held its annual conference, during which many members expressed their concern over the new school bulletin. Mrs J. Heta, speaking on behalf of Ngati Porou, claimed that, ‘the living conditions shown [were] not typical of Maori life, even in remote areas’, and that if the aim of the publication was to depict a happy Maori family relationship, ‘a more average, typical family background’, could have been selected for the photographs (Otago Daily Times, 23/7/64). Mrs J. Baxter, delegate to the Board of Trustees of the Maori Educational Foundation, asserted that such threats to Maori confidence and self-respect were ‘a bigger problem than land tenure, living conditions, health or education’ (Otago Daily Times, 23/7/64). As a result, conference delegates passed a resolution calling for the bulletin to ‘be completely and immediately withdrawn from publication and from issue to all schools, and that similar future publications be referred for approval to the Maori Education Foundation Board of Trustees’.

With the Minister of Education temporarily out of Wellington on official business, the press approached the Director of Education, A.E. Campbell, for his comments on the League’s concerns. In response, Campbell pointed out that Washday was the first in a series of bulletins aiming to show how both Maori and Pakeha families lived in New Zealand:

None of the bulletins is intended to be completely typical or representative of families in general; nor is it intended to be a comment on Maori housing. Rather, it is intended to bring out the affectionate and co-operative relationship between parents and children, and among the children themselves. I am sorry that some Maori people have found cause to object to the Bulletin. When its purpose is understood, and it is considered as a whole, there seems to me to be little ground for criticism. (Campbell 1964)

As the senior Department officer, Campbell was again responding to public concern with informed disinterest. However, Campbell was about to discover just how insistent a minister could be, especially when prompted by Cabinet colleagues mindful of the emerging political power of the Maori middle class. On 29 July 1964 the League’s Dominion Secretary, Jane F. Bell, sent a letter to the Minister of Education, the Hon. A.E. Kinsella, citing the resolution and protesting against Washday in the strongest possible terms, emphasising that ‘feeling was high and delegates much disturbed’. Bell pointed out that the photographs had been taken in a private home, not a pa, that the primitive living conditions shown were not typical of contemporary Maori life, that the family depicted could be identified and suffer shame, and that the bulletin would have a detrimental effect on racial attitudes given the drift of the Maori population to the cities (Bell 1964).

On the same day, in a letter to Campbell, appropriately stamped ‘VERY URGENT’, Kinsella outlined the press coverage of the League’s objections and requested Arnold’s comments as he was expecting an approach from the Minister of Maori Affairs over the matter. The Minister’s private secretary had already advised the Minister that Campbell had been similarly involved with another school publication in the time of the last Labour Government (1957-60), when Sir Ereua Tiritikatea had taken exception to a statement in one of the publications dealing with the failure of Tiri’s potato crop. Thus the Minister insisted that:

I would like to have your comments on this particular publication so that I am already armed should I receive an approach from the Minister of Maori Affairs. No doubt it is desirable that we should let our pupils know something of the Maori way of life but I feel that while we are promoting the advances of Maori education, it might be as well for any proposed school publication dealing with any aspect of Maori life to be seen by yourself or the Assistant Director before it finally goes to print. (Kinsella 1964)
Campbell responded a day later, on 30 July, reiterating his previous comments to the Press. He pointed out the bulletin was 'a positive attempt to depict healthy family life to young children'. While he realised that 'sensitive Maoris might take exception to the photographs', he nevertheless felt that, 'If instructions were to be given to have the bulletin withdrawn, it would serve to increase the attention it is receiving' (Campbell 1964).

The government, however, had no desire to be subjected to parliamentary criticism on racial issues. On 3 August a brief press statement from Kinsella was released to the evening Radio News. The statement acknowledged the strength of the League's concern. While no-one had denied that the family relationships portrayed were 'affectionate, good-humoured and cooperative', Kinsella conceded that it was now 'clear that the publication has given offence and I have, therefore, decided that it be withdrawn from the schools' (Press statement 1964). A Gazette notice of 15 August advised schools to return all copies of Washday direct to the Government Printer in Wellington, where they were to be pulped (New Zealand Department of Education 1964). Neither adverse reaction in the national press to evident censorship, nor protest from many Maori on the grounds that the bulletin was both enjoyable to read and accurate, were to make the slightest difference. By late August 1964 Campbell had penned a brief but revealing postscript on his original memo:

On future consideration, and after being made aware of the strength of the objections from the Maori Women's Welfare League, I came to the conclusion that, on balance, it would be better to withdraw the bulletin. I particularly feared the damage that could result if the matter became one of Party political controversy. (Campbell 1964)

Over the next few months thousands of copies were returned. Press reaction was largely adverse, with the government accused of censorship and the Department of tame compliance. It was all to no avail. The League's outrage and the government's fears that an educational issue was becoming politically damaging had effectively accomplished what the various critics of the new education had been unable to achieve in two decades — the effective reversal of a major departmental initiative.

CASE STUDY TWO — THE DEPARTMENT ON THE OFFENSIVE

The previous case study demonstrates the Department's vulnerability to criticism. This following case study, however, illustrates that under certain conditions the Department was not only able to ride out controversy but was also capable of striking back effectively at its critics. In the late 1970s, education was once again a subject of controversy. Second-wave feminism and conservative Christian pressure groups, such as the Concerned Parents Association, vied for power and media attention. The Ross Report (1973) and the Johnson Report (1977) sparked a wave of community debate concerning sex instruction for students. In the wake of two major oil price hikes and the increasing volatility of the primary produce export market, the new National Government of R.D. Muldoon sought to reduce public expenditure. Accordingly, Treasury began to put considerable pressure on government departments, particularly education, to cut costs. Youth employment continued to climb rapidly. By 1977 New Zealand had the second-highest youth unemployment in the OECD (Openshaw 1995, p.104).

In turn growing public anxiety over unemployment fuelled a 'back-to-basics' campaign that portrayed the Department as the prime cause of falling academic standards. In order to allay public concern, the Director General of Education, W.L. Renwick, suggested to the Minister of Education, the Hon. L.W. Gandar, that there be a review of academic standards in state schools. The outcome was the 1978 report, Educational Standards in State Schools, based largely on information gathered from primary and secondary school inspectors. As with previous exercises of this nature, the report largely vindicated the Department. Predictably, perhaps, the report concluded that standards in basic subjects were being in general maintained, that much public criticism was ill informed, and that further educational progress was dependent on higher levels of funding (New Zealand Education Department 1978, pp. 98-106). Far from silencing critics, however, the report became a major catalyst in the founding of a new pressure group, the Educational Standards Association, in July 1978.

Among curriculum subjects, social studies was again a target for criticism. In 1977 the Department trialled the new F1-IV social studies syllabus in selected schools. Possessing a strong emphasis on social studies as social science, the syllabus was intended to replace the 1962 Suggestions in the upper primary school, and give clear directions to secondary school social studies. The 'Man: A Course of Study' (MACOS) program, developed in the United States during the 1960s and released for commercial distribution in 1971, seemed ideally suited to the new approach. It had also been used as a social studies course in Queensland since the early 1970s, with Year 6 children. By 1977 its use had become more widespread in the upper primary school. In New Zealand the introduction of MACOS was to follow the typical pattern of centre-periphery innovation in being initially supported by officers within the Department. The Department had been closely monitoring events in Australia, but the cost of the new program was relatively high. It was not, therefore, until 1975 that it was first introduced in New Zealand by Pleasant Point High School (Tablet 1977, editorial).

MACOS was organised around three fundamental questions: what was human about human beings, how did they get that way, and how could they be made more so. The program's goals were: to give children a set of models for thinking about the social world, to provide them with intellectual tools for investigating human behaviour, and to evoke an appreciation of the common humanity of humans. A series of units drawn from research into animal behaviour, exercises and materials was intended to permit children to gather data and formulate hypotheses to be investigated in a group setting. MACOS also incorporated an intensive case study of the culture of the Netsilik Eskimos, including simulations, records, pictures, charts, written material and films (Smith 1977).

Colin Knight, a district senior inspector within the Department, was a key figure in the introduction of MACOS. Knight's motives for supporting the program's introduction can be discerned in his report for Renwick concerning a Department course held in July 1977 to determine the suitability of MACOS for New Zealand schools. In this report
Knight revealed that his personal interest in the problem of prejudice had begun in 1970, when he carried out research with children aged 6-16 years. In a subsequent paper, ‘What children learn from Social Studies’, presented to a teachers’ refresher course conference in Nelson, Knight presented a case for cultural relativism:

The most important task I believe schools have to perform today is to help pupils develop empathy with other cultures, other socio-economic groups and with other individuals whose values and behaviour may differ from their own. Violence in New Zealand will increase unless we consciously strive to improve race relations and develop better understanding between the diverse economic and social groups which make up our society. We must strive in schools to develop the belief that ‘all people regardless of race, religion, class, occupation, age or sex are truly equal’. (Knight 1977)

Surviving records indicate that the Department was by this time already aware of anti-MACOS sentiment in Australia and the United States. Senior Department officials already possessed a pamphlet put out by the University of Queensland in July 1977 in which the necessity of communication with parents, including the offering of alternative courses, was emphasised, and major criticisms together with responses to those criticisms had been detailed (Smith 1977).

The Department had also obtained a copy of a critical essay on MACOS by United States researcher Peter Dow (Dow 1976, pp.35-39). Dow, while sympathetic to the ideals of the program, nevertheless warned of the hostility emanating from Southern Baptists, adding that ‘one of the worst mistakes of social studies teachers and curriculum planners is our passion for “getting a message across”’ (Dow 1976, p.38). Moreover, the Department was fully aware that only two sets of print materials were at the time available in New Zealand. The copy owned by Pleasant Point had been purchased from Education Media, Australia, in Melbourne for approximately $NZ375, plus about $125 transport, while the other had been purchased in 1972 by Christchurch Teachers’ College. There were no New Zealand agents for MACOS, and the material could only be purchased directly from the United States or Australia. A record was kept of those teachers who had been trained to teach the course, and materials were not to be sold to schools unless the teachers concerned had been trained to use them.

Department and Minister, however, were agreed on the need for extreme caution. A meeting between Gandar and three senior Department officers, including Renwick, saw the Minister voicing concern at a relatively early stage that he should personally retain political control over any official statements to be released, thus avoiding potentially conflicting information. In fact, an indication of potential controversy had come in April 1977 when the chairman of the Concerned Parents Association (CPA), P. Clements, had written to the Minister expressing concern over the importation of MACOS. Gandar had personally replied to this letter, setting out the principles of the course and reviewing events that led to its introduction at Pleasant Point. CPA, however, allegedly sent the reply, to a certain congressman in the United States prominent in the anti-MACOS campaign, who subsequently claimed that one of the main reasons for the program’s introduction in New Zealand was monetary gain (Renwick 1977). The Minister was particularly concerned that his own comment as to the enthusiasm of a group of teachers for MACOS was being used by CPA in order to demonstrate collusion between the Department and teachers sympathetic to the goals of the program. In his meeting with Department officers, therefore, Renwick was extremely careful to emphasise that any future replies to correspondence emanating from the Department had to directly cite actual statements from the Minister.

With the abortion issue being hotly debated in Parliament, CPA was now actively soliciting support from Catholics. Less than two weeks after Renwick’s caution to Department officers, an editorial in the national Catholic weekly newspaper, Tablet, drew on information from CPA to support its claim that the Department was riding roughshod over parental concern about MACOS. The editorial further alleged that Gandar had been unsympathetic to the rising tide of public concern, despite a recent National Party Conference having expressed disquiet over MACOS and social studies teaching generally. As evidence it cited the Minister’s reply to CPA which argued that MACOS permitted students to explore controversial issues in an open-ended, open-minded manner, warning that ‘this technique of developing values had been proven to be more effective than the process of indoctrination which was no longer acceptable as an educational process’ (Tablet 1977, editorial).

On 25 August 1977, the day after the Tablet article, Gandar and his press secretary again met with senior Department officers. The meeting also included two teachers from Pleasant Point, including the head of the school’s social studies department (Whitelock 1977). Once again the main topic was the allegations CPA had made to Gandar concerning the program’s depiction of cannibalism, genocide, infanticide, bloodshed and unacceptable sexual practices. Gandar inquired what approaches had been made to the principal and parents at Pleasant Point prior to the introduction of the course. He was assured that, after attending an introductory course on MACOS, the head had borrowed materials from Christchurch Teachers’ College and discussed them with the principal. The course had then been fully explained to parents prior to the school purchasing its own copy of the program. Resulting publicity over the past weeks, however, had prompted the principal to make a further report to the education board, and the whole issue had been further publicised in a local newspaper.

The considered view of the Department officers attending the meeting was that CPA information was at best inaccurate, at worst distorted and bigoted. Cannibalism, genocide and infanticide were not emphasised, while the deaths of old people had to be seen in a specific cultural context. The films did not advocate wife swapping, though the teachers’ handbook contained a section pointing out that the selection of a female partner for a hunter was not haphazard, but was determined by familial and ritualistic relationships. As for the blood shown in the seal hunting scenes, asserted the Department officers, this was unlikely to disturb New Zealand children, many of whom were well used to farm life (Whitelock 1977).

The Minister, however, emphasised that he did not wish to be seen in a censorial role. He wondered about the wisdom of accepting an invitation to visit Pleasant Point.
He thought that the two teachers might show some material to parliamentary colleagues, but emphasised strongly that ‘his flank needed to be covered’. For their part the Department officers were concerned that an attempt to show MACOS materials on TV might well backfire, because a passive audience, the majority of whom saw TV as entertainment, could take the wrong inferences. To a suggestion that the two teachers show the MACOS material to the Minister’s parliamentary colleagues, however, the Minister replied:

I do not think these gentlemen should have their own flanks exposed to certain members of the Minister’s Committee on Education. Should such a meeting eventuate, I think these teachers should be briefed and also accompanied by a Departmental officer charged with diverting some of the flak which is likely to be thrown up. (Whitelock 1977)

Instead, a more limited meeting to view MACOS was held on 1 September 1977 which included only the Minister of Education and half a dozen Department officers. On 10 September the major national dailies carried a strong defence of the program by Gandar, which owed much to the departmental position on the issue. Accordingly, Gandar emphasised that Pleasant Point had introduced MACOS on its own initiative and that schools would be free to select material most appropriate to their needs when the new Fl-4 Social Studies Syllabus was introduced next year. The allegations that MACOS was destructive of Christian moral values, and supportive of wife swapping, female infanticide and witchcraft, he observed, merely indicated that critics had no clear conception of the course (Otago Daily Times 1977).

Any hope that the Minister’s press statement together with a clamp-down on further publicity might end the controversy, however, was to be short lived (New Zealand Department of Education 1977). A flying visit to New Zealand from the Texas-based school textbook critic, Norma Gabler, prompted CPA to again write to Gandar in December 1978. Knight complained to his Department colleagues that the latest CPA letter was ‘a real shocker, chock full of erroneous statements of fact and mischievous insinuations’ (Knight 1978). Further support for the position of Minister and Department came from Keith Thomson, the Course Chairman of a MACOS in-service course held in Christchurch during late November. Thomson forwarded a resolution from the 35 teachers who attended stating ‘that we have complete confidence in the Minister of Education in his handling of the ... controversy and the course of action he has adopted in allowing individual schools to make an informed decision in consultation with parents of our pupils, on the implementation of this course’ (Thomson 1978).

Gandar now had all the evidence and support he needed to launch a decisive counter-attack of his own. In February he sent a lengthy and strongly worded letter to CPA, enclosing several additional articles. The single New Zealand school using the program, Gandar pointed out, had kept parents informed and they had supported it. Both his own Department officers and the enclosed article by Dow had pinpointed the major opposition in the United States as having originated at the Southern Baptist Convention in October 1976. The enclosed, photocopied extract from the Congressional record demonstrated that American congressmen were not well informed on curriculum matters, hence little weight could be attached to Congressional debates in making decisions on New Zealand education. The only major expression of opinion on MACOS conveyed to him recently, Gandar asserted, was the vote of confidence carried at a teachers’ meeting in late 1977. Pupils were now quite perceptive on the curriculum they received while ‘the teacher, as a trained professional, remained the main index of the programme’s effectiveness’. As for Gabler, she had never viewed the full four-and-a-half hours of MACOS program films, and had by her own admission in a public television interview in July 1977 conceded that she could only sit through 20 minutes. Moreover, at the Christchurch Town Hall meeting, where Gabler had spoken, a primary school inspector in attendance had reported that Gabler would only accept questions, not comments, on her talk. The inspector, therefore, was unable to correct her ‘misconceptions’. Finally, when MACOS was introduced at Pleasant Point, the Department had been aware of no New Zealand controversy. This had only occurred when Gabler herself had publicised it two years later, in July 1977. Consequently Gandar saw no cause at all for a public statement (Gandar 1978).

By early 1978 it was not the Department but CPA that was becoming marginalised. On 21 February 1978 the president of the New Zealand Parent Teachers’ Association, C.J. Welsh, lent his support to the MACOS program in New Zealand, condemning what he termed ‘the frightening pressure of extremist parent organisations, with their calls for the censorship of texts, punitive discipline, and the elimination of any values from the school barring their own (Christchurch Press, 21 February 1978).

Even though these broadsides virtually ended the MACOS controversy in New Zealand, the Department continued to keep the lid on potential difficulties by both monitoring institutions where the program was offered and by limiting its use to approved secondary schools. In early 1978 Burnside High School, Christchurch, began using the program. A review involving school and Department officers was conducted in April of that year. The review reported that the course did not seem to have been controversial for teachers, parents or students, though it noted that the Netsilik Eskimo section was still to come. The review also posed some questions for the future, namely whether the program should be introduced as far as F3, whether basic skills should be structured into the program, and whether MACOS did a better job than more traditional social studies approaches (Burnside High School Education Department 1978).

When Cobham Intermediate planned to use the program with two Form 2 classes in late 1976, however, the Department responded with predictable caution. The school assured the Department that the acting deputy principal had an MA degree, was in direct control of school social studies, was a member of the New Zealand Educational Institute’s Social Education Curriculum Consultative Committee, and a member of the NZELI Liaison Committee, which coordinated primary and secondary programs. The school also insisted that the principal had obtained permission from the school committee, advised the District Senior Inspector Primary Schools and the inspector in charge of
primary social studies. He had also informed parents early in the year of the possibility that MACOS might be used, and sent notes to parents of two classes involved, inviting them to a meeting at which Knight would present information on the program. The Department, nevertheless, remained adamant that the introduction of MACOS in primary and intermediate schools ‘... would re-awake the controversy of a few months ago. It could, also, jeopardise the introduction of the forms 1-4 social studies syllabus, which became official on 1 February 1978’ (Boag 1978).

The early 1980s brought deterioration in the relatively cordial relationship between Minister and Department that had characterised the Gandar era. In late 1981 Gandar lost his parliamentary seat in a closely fought election that saw the Nationals cling to power. The Hon. M.V. Wellington, a strong conservative who sympathised with some of the aims of CPA, superseded him as Minister of Education. The controversy over MACOS, however, was now well and truly dead in New Zealand. The Department had shown that, with the support of the Minister and by maintaining strict control of a potentially controversial innovation, it could ride out storms and confound its most vitriolic critics. This institutional experience, however, was to be irretrievably lost just over a decade later when, in the most drastic overhaul of the nation’s educational administration in a century, the Department of Education was disestablished, to be replaced by a new Ministry of Education.

CONCLUSION

In matters of educational controversy, the Department was throughout its long life highly sensitive to suggestions that it represented any particular viewpoint. Instead it attempted to respond to accusations with the voice of informed disinterest. In times of particularly acute controversy, however, this is a hard act to maintain. In both the case studies discussed in this article, the educational bureaucracy initially responded with informed disinterest but ultimately reacted politically. In case study one, the Department was seen to utilise several variations of this strategy during the early postwar years. When the Washdyke controversy broke, however, informed disinterest soon yielded to political and bureaucratic imperatives, especially when it became evident that the government would not countenance the issue coming under public and parliamentary scrutiny. Only by actively collaborating in the withdrawal process was the Department able to resolve the controversy, albeit at some cost in terms of adverse press reaction and criticism from many teachers.

In case study two, the strategy of informed disinterest was employed with far more success. During the late 1970s the Department had many critics at a time when schooling was being blamed for contributing to the nation’s economic and social problems. Given this difficult political context, both Minister and Department opted to retain fairly tight control of a potentially controversial program. Regular meetings between policy makers and policy implementers made it feasible to speak with a single voice. Starved of information, critics were left with few openings to exploit. Much also depended on the cordial relationship between Gandar and Renwick that made it possible for the Minister not to simply react to the CPAs allegations but to effectively counter-attack.

Taken together, the two case studies may be held to largely confirm the conclusions of Salter and Tapper regarding the Department of Education and Science (DES) in the United Kingdom. Salter and Tapper argue that during certain periods the power of the DES was:

- enhanced by its technical advantages (precision, speed, continuity etc.), the cult of the objective and indispensable expert; its hoarding and control of specialised knowledge; its use of secrecy to increase the superiority of the ‘professionally informed’; and
- its general protective cloak of rational organisation and operation. (Salter & Tapper 1981, pp.57-58)

Nonetheless under certain circumstances educational bureaucracies can also be vulnerable to political pressure. Goosdon and Marsh have observed that, in Queensland, the state government has shown willingness on occasions to override the educational bureaucracy and to censor the use of controversial curriculum materials. In the case of MACOS, for instance, the strength of the opposition ultimately proved irresistible: ‘The Premier and his Cabinet clearly held the trump card and had a dominant influence over the events leading up to the banning of MACOS in Queensland state schools’ (Goosdon & Marsh 1996, pp.142-143). In New Zealand, Department and Minister combined to effectively neutralise MACOS opposition. The Department, however, had little option but to acknowledge the latent power of the politicians in the Washdyke incident.

Thirty years later, the Department’s successor, the New Zealand Ministry of Education, was to have a similar experience with social studies curricula. On this occasion too, despite utilising the voice of informed disinterest, the Ministry was rapidly overwhelmed by the increasingly political nature of the controversy. Similarities notwithstanding, however, there are significant differences between the two education bureaucracies that should be carefully noted.

First, over successive decades, the old Department built up considerable expertise in curriculum, and the institutional knowledge thereby gained lent some credibility to the strategy of informed disinterest. The new Ministry, on the other hand, does not possess this advantage. It employed few able senior Department officers after the changeover, and many new Ministry staff were on short-term contracts of various types. The result was that the bureaucracy as a whole possessed little institutional memory. Second, the Ministry lacked any real understanding of New Zealand educational history that might have enabled it to respond more effectively. The result was that informed interest in the hands of a historically blind Ministry publicity machine all too rapidly became a transparently face-saving exercise in which ‘image’, as perceived by the bureaucracy’s image-makers, became the main priority. This tactic resulted in the virtual abandonment of any intellectual and moral high ground to the critics. The price was the shelving of two successive social studies curriculum documents and the enthronement of a third, literally by Ministerial fiat (Oxenshaw 1998; Oxenshaw, 2000).
Further questions remain to be investigated. The changing nature of the relationship between individual ministers and senior educational bureaucrats over time still requires further exploration. The interaction between the education bureaucracy and the teacher unions, especially when the latter became more intimately involved in curriculum reform from the late 1960s, is another area for inquiry. Finally, this article has concentrated exclusively upon the reaction of educational bureaucracies to external pressure, but there is another story to be told concerning the way bureaucracies respond to disputes and debates within the teaching profession, such as that which occurred over the new English syllabus during the early 1980s. This article has opened up a promising field of study for New Zealand historians of education that will hopefully allow us to address problems old while also permitting us to comment perceptively on problems new.

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