

**AN ADDRESS TO THE 22<sup>ND</sup> AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND  
EDUCATION LAW CONFERENCE BY THE HONOURABLE PETER  
UNDERWOOD AC, GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA, "FUNCTIONAL  
ILLITERACY IN AUSTRALIA - A CULTURAL AND COMMUNITY  
PROBLEM."**

**HOBART, THURSDAY, 3RD OCTOBER 2013.**

First of all, as Governor of Tasmania, may I add my welcome to you all to the 22<sup>nd</sup> annual conference of the Australia and New Zealand Education Law Association. A special welcome goes to all the visitors to our island State and I hope that you will have a little time while you are here to have a look around Tasmania for it is especially beautiful in the Spring-time.

Seven years have passed since I last spoke to you and I think that seven years have passed since you held your conference here - either that or you have held it here, but I wasn't asked to speak - and much has changed in my life over the last seven years. When I spoke at your last conference I had been on the Tasmanian Supreme Court Bench for 22 years, the last two of which I had been the Chief Justice. Two years after your last conference here, I resigned from the Court and shuffled off to Government House. I envisaged that it would be like easing into retirement, but the job turned out to be quite to the contrary. In many ways it is much busier at Government House than it was at the Court. But I have no complaints for it is a very interesting job, one in which I am always meeting new and interesting people. However, there appear to be a limited number of dendrites and synapses in my brain and when I last spoke to you, they were filled up with information from the latest High Court decision about such issues as the admissibility of

coincidence, or similar fact evidence, and where our Court of Appeal went wrong when it overturned that brilliant decision I wrote a few months earlier. Now, my dendrites and synapses are busy processing information about such matters as the American Ambassador's views on the civil war in Syria, the agenda for the next Executive Council meeting and the law of negligence and the standard of care that the law requires a teacher in the school to maintain seems to have somehow leaked away.

Accordingly, I experienced a stab of trepidation when I picked up your file a couple of weeks ago and read that I was not just to open your conference this morning, as I had thought was the case, but that I was a keynote speaker.

I read that the theme of your conference this year is "Safe, Successful and Sustainable Education – Is the Law a Shield or a Sword?" Well, what on earth does that mean? I asked myself, and turned to the rest of the programme to see if I could get some guidance there. I noted that although this is only a two day conference, it is indeed a very busy one with no less than 38 concurrent sessions packed into these two days. It reminded me of a story a friend of mine told me about a conference that he went to as a keynote speaker that also had many concurrent sessions. He said that he had put together a presentation and turned up at the conference on the appointed day. In good time, he found the room in which he was scheduled to speak and went in, but no one was there. Just a minute before he was due to start speaking a man came in and sat down in the middle of the front row and waited. So my friend thought well, I know that there's only one person here, but I've prepared a paper and come all this way to deliver it, so I might as well start and so he did. The solitary listener seemed to appreciate the talk for he laughed

at the jokes and nodded agreement with the serious points and clapped loudly at the end. Of course, when he had finished my friend went down and thanked him and said that although he was the only one in the audience he really seemed to appreciate the presentation and was there anything that he could do to repay the man for being such a good listener. He replied, "Well, actually there is something. Would you mind staying for a bit, because I am the next speaker?"

Now, I have to confess that I found the titles of most of the concurrent sessions in your programme as mystifying as the theme itself. For some time now I have had a little difficulty with the word "sustainable". I think that it is a word that has been overused, especially here in Tasmania when it turned up in just about every second sentence during the interminable debates that have been raging over the forestry industry. It's a bit like the words "icon" and "iconic", but I don't want to talk to you about that, although corruption of the English language is a bit of a hobby horse of mine. What is sustainable education? I turned to my Oxford English dictionary (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) to learn that the primary meaning of sustainable means [quote] "capable of being borne (BORNE) or endured." That didn't seem to be much help to me, although I really accept that I saw it as a salutary warning for me and other speakers to make sure that their presentation was sustainable or capable of being borne.

However, I then noticed that according to the conference programme tomorrow morning, Professors Russo and Daniel are going to talk about "Education as a Fundamental Right: The Key to a Sustainable Future," and I thought to myself; that is absolutely right:

today, education is a fundamental right and is indeed, the key to a sustainable - in any sense of that word - future.

Did you know that 49% of Tasmanians aged between 15 and 74 years are functionally illiterate? The Australian Bureau of Statistics tells us that [quote] “approximately 174,000 people in this State do not have the basic skills needed to understand and use information from newspapers, magazines, books and brochures and that overall, Tasmania has the lowest level of adult literacy skills in the nation.”<sup>1</sup> Worse, the same data tells us there has been no improvement in adult literacy levels since they were last measured in 2006. The same source tells us in a report released on 15<sup>th</sup> February this year<sup>2</sup> that 47% of all Australians aged between 15 and 74 years are functionally illiterate and that there has been little improvement over the last few years. What is not so widely known is that, compared to other developed nations, Australia is on a par with other countries such as the United States of America, the United Kingdom and Canada.

While illiteracy refers to a total inability to read or write, functional illiteracy is much more difficult to define, as functionally illiterate adults can generally read and write to a limited degree. Although there is no widely accepted definition of functional illiteracy, in 1978, UNESCO’s General Conference adopted a definition of functional literacy - still in use today - which states: ‘A person is functionally literate who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his group and community

---

<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008. Adult Literacy and Life Skills Programme, Summary Results 2006. Cat No. 4228.0

<sup>2</sup> Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, Australia, 2011-2012. <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4228.0main+features992011-2012> accessed 16<sup>th</sup> September 2013.

and also for enabling him to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his own and the community's development.'<sup>3</sup>

With respect, that is not a terribly helpful definition, but that must necessarily be so for functional illiteracy is a term which of necessity has a variable definition. The definition used varies from study to study and from nation to nation<sup>4</sup>, as some countries require better reading and writing skills than others. For example, Australia as a developed country with an information based economy - most occupations involve reading and writing, processing information, expressing ideas, etc. - there exists a much higher expectation of literacy and therefore a higher standard of literacy is required in order to be classed as 'functionally literate' when compared with a less developed nation, where most occupations may be more physically demanding.

So, a caution must be given when using statistical results and analysis of functional illiteracy. Different surveys will have utilised different standards to measure what they have determined as functional illiteracy. When the ABS state that 49% of Tasmanians aged between 15 and 74 years are functionally illiterate, this figure may have been significantly less if these same individuals, with their same literacy capabilities, had been living in a less-developed country because the literacy requirements in such a country would have been significantly less. So an understanding of functional illiteracy requires an understanding of the markers, or standards, used by the ABS. The ABS

---

<sup>3</sup> Education for All Global Monitoring Report [http://www.unesco.org/education/GMR2006/full/chapt6\\_eng.pdf](http://www.unesco.org/education/GMR2006/full/chapt6_eng.pdf) at page 154 accessed 12<sup>th</sup> September 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Giere, U., *Functional Illiteracy in Industrialized Countries: An Analytical Bibliography*, UNESCO < <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0007/000770/077067eo.pdf> >, p. 20

utilised four domains for the measures of literacy in their Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey, Australia, 2006:

- Prose literacy: the ability to understand and use information from various kinds of narrative texts, including texts from newspapers, magazines and brochures.
- Document literacy: the knowledge and skills required to locate and use information contained in various formats including job applications, payroll forms, transportation schedules, maps, tables and charts.
- Numeracy: the knowledge and skills required to effectively manage and respond to the mathematical demands of diverse situations.
- Problem solving: goal-directed thinking and action for which no routine solution is available.<sup>5</sup>

Functional illiteracy therefore focuses on the ability to comprehend and utilise the information that can be conveyed through reading and writing. A functionally illiterate person can read and possibly write simple sentences with a limited vocabulary, but is unable to read or write well enough to deal with the everyday requirements of life in their own society, i.e. he/she may have difficulty reading instruction manuals for appliances, using e-mail and internet websites, reading the newspaper, reading or writing letters sent via mail, comprehending job advertisements, past-due notices, banking paperwork, complex signs and posters, operating in a business or office environment.

---

<sup>5</sup> ABS, *Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey*, Australia, 2006, <  
[http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Previousproducts/4228.0Main%20Features22006%20\(Reissue\)?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=4228.0&issue=2006%20\(Reissue\)&num=&view=](http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Previousproducts/4228.0Main%20Features22006%20(Reissue)?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=4228.0&issue=2006%20(Reissue)&num=&view=) >

University students can even be classed as being functionally illiterate if they lack the ability to accurately convey their thoughts and knowledge in their written work – as they are illiterate for the function required.<sup>6</sup>

It is also important to note that a foreigner who cannot read and write in the native language of the country in which they live may therefore also be considered functionally illiterate (regardless of being classed as literate in their native language).

In 2002, the United Nations declared the period from 2003 to 2012 the United Nations Literacy Decade, and Resolution 56/116 [quote] “acknowledged the place of literacy at the heart of lifelong learning, affirming that: ‘literacy is crucial to the acquisition, by every child, youth and adult, of essential life skills that enable them to address the challenges they can face in life, and represents an essential step in basic education, which is an indispensable means for effective participation in the societies and economies of the twenty-first century.’”<sup>7</sup>

So, here we are at the end of the United Nation’s literacy decade and what’s the report card for Australia? Not good, according to Dr Stewart Riddle, lecturer at the School of Teacher Education and Early Childhood University of Southern Queensland who, in May this year asked what were the options for the 1,200 workers at the Ford Plants at Geelong and Broad Meadows who were facing retrenchment by 2016, and answered his own question saying:

---

<sup>6</sup> Marks, Russell, 13 DEC 12, ‘Time to declare war on illiteracy’, *The Sydney Morning Herald* <  
<http://www.smh.com.au/national/education/time-to-declare-war-on-illiteracy-20121213-2bbp1.html> >

<sup>7</sup> Supra at page 155.

“... as these workers consider their futures, we need to understand that nearly half of Australian adults are considered functionally illiterate. And manufacturing workers in Victoria, which includes those in the firing line at Ford, were found to have even lower literacy skills, with 54% scoring at the lowest levels.

The data are alarming and there are now serious concerns about these levels of literacy and the impact they have on the employment, health and education opportunities for workers.

Given the strong links between increasing literacy and better employment opportunities, economic independence and social conditions including health and education, this is a serious issue not only for manufacturing workers, but for the rest of the Australian community.”<sup>8</sup>

In a recent radio interview respected Australian economist, Saul Eslake said, “I think the low level of educational attainment of Tasmanian workers is probably the single most important reason why productivity in Tasmania is significantly below levels on the mainland.”<sup>9</sup>

In a free market economy such as we enjoy in Australia, it is often claimed that it is the job of governments to provide the infrastructure to enable private enterprise to flourish and create jobs. When that is said, people often have in mind ports, railways, shipping and the like, but I want to suggest to the members of the Australia and New Zealand

---

<sup>8</sup> <https://theconversation.com/the-future-for-ford-workers-literacy-will-be-key-14548>. Accessed 12<sup>th</sup> September 2013.

<sup>9</sup> ABC New Programme AM, 20<sup>th</sup> September 2013 <http://www.abc.net.au/am/content/2013/s3852848.htm>

Education Law Association that the most important infrastructure for any nation is an educated and functionally literate population. For as Riddle writes “Given the strong links between increasing literacy and better employment opportunities, economic independence and social conditions including health and education, this is a serious issue not only for manufacturing workers, but for the rest of the Australian community.”<sup>10</sup>

The Australian Council of Social Services report published last year entitled, “Poverty in Australia”<sup>11</sup> asserts that its key finding is:

“... that in 2012, after taking into account housing costs, an estimated 2,265,000 people or 12.8% of all people, including 575,000 children (17.3% of all children) lived in households below the most austere poverty line used in international research.”<sup>12</sup>

The final report on the 1996 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) observed<sup>13</sup> that, across all participating countries, people with low literacy were [quote] “... less likely to be in employment, less likely to find work when looking for it and less likely to work regularly when a job is obtained. Because the world of work also is a significant factor in the acquisition and building of skills, adults with low skills find themselves at a distinct disadvantage.”<sup>14</sup> All I can say about the ACOSS finding that 12.8% of the population of Australia is living in poverty is

---

<sup>10</sup> Supra. See also “Australia’s Skills and Workforce Development Needs” Discussion Paper July 2012. Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency, especially at page 48.

<sup>11</sup> ISBN: 978 0 85871 082 5

<sup>12</sup> Supra at page 7.

<sup>13</sup> Citing OECD and Statistics Canada, 2000

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/1301.0~2012~Main%20Features~The%20National%20Year%20of%20Reading:%20libraries%20helping%20to%20make%20Australia%20a%20nation%20of%20readers~206> accessed 16<sup>th</sup> September 2013.

that, with a functional illiteracy rate between 47% and 49% for the whole country, I am surprised that the number of people living below the poverty line is not much higher.

With respect to the Australian workforce, the Australian Industry Group wrote in a February 2012 report<sup>15</sup> that the ABS Australian Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey 2006 means that over 4 million employees are functionally illiterate and 300,000 unemployed people are at a *lower level of illiteracy than the 4 million workers who are in employment*. [repeat sentence] The group conducted a survey in which 75% of respondents reported that their business was affected by low levels of literacy and numeracy, BUT – and listen to this – [quote] “only 8% of respondents reported that they had adequate capacity to assist the improvement of literacy and numeracy skills”<sup>16</sup>!!

Well, what is to be done about this appalling state of affairs? The usual political solution offered to deal with a problem like this is to issue a press release advising that it is Government Policy to spend umpteen billion dollars on improving functional literacy in Australia. Such press releases don't emphasise that the money is to be spent over 10 years nor do they specify on what the money will be spent nor how functional literacy will be taught.

This is what the Industry Skills Councils suggested in its recent report:<sup>17</sup>

“The Industry Skills Councils believe that responsibility for building the Literacy, Language and Numeracy skills of

---

<sup>15</sup> “When Words Fail” National Workforce Literacy Project February 2012. Australian Industry Group.

<sup>16</sup> Supra at page 15.

<sup>17</sup> [http://www.isc.org.au/pdf/NoMoreExcuses\\_FINAL%20FINAL%20single%20page.pdf](http://www.isc.org.au/pdf/NoMoreExcuses_FINAL%20FINAL%20single%20page.pdf) accessed 17<sup>th</sup> September 2013.

Australians should be shared by industry and all education sectors. Nothing less than a co-ordinated response to the LLN (Literacy, Language and Numeracy) challenge will succeed. To achieve this, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) should establish an overarching blueprint for action on LLN in Australia 2012-2022 to identify and address long-term goals that will profoundly shift the capacity of learners and the workforce and significantly impact our nation's future.

More immediately, within the Vocational Education and Training (VET) system, ISCs propose:

- better identification of the LLN skills of learners before training, and targeted funding to address identified LLN skill gaps
- the inclusion of clear advice on LLN skill requirements in Training Packages and/or their companion volumes
- the implementation of a strategy to develop greater national awareness of LLN issues, including the de-stigmatisation of LLN skill development
- an increased capacity in the VET system, and all practitioners, to support the LLN skill development needs of learners and workers."

Well, I certainly do not suggest for a moment that the Industry Skills Councils are acting other than in what they believe to be the best interests of the functionally illiterate in this country, but with respect, I

do not think that those generalities will do much to change the rate of illiteracy in Australia. It may be noted that, at the end of the United Nations Literacy Decade in which there has been no real improvement in the illiteracy rate of our country, the proposal is to spend another decade in which the governments of the six States, the Territories and the Commonwealth should produce what – “an overarching blueprint” to do what? – to take action on LLN in Australia – to do what? – identify and address long-term goals to achieve what? – a profound shift in the capacity of learners and the workforce and a significant impact our nation’s future! What on earth, I rhetorically ask, do all those generalities mean – “overarching blueprint” – “long-term goals” ...

The executive summary goes on to set out what the report describes as immediate proposals within the VET system, but these are not any more specific than the general statement. The first specific proposal is “Better identification of the LLN skills of learners before training and targeted funded to address identified LLN skill gaps” and the last is “better-targeted solutions for building the LLN skills of workers.” I mean, you wouldn’t want to have your funding ‘off target’ would you? The so-called specific proposals in between the first and the last are no more specific.

I venture to suggest that widespread functional illiteracy is a cultural and community problem that calls for a community response rather than buckets of government money and overarching plans. I commend to you an excellent initiative that was launched by the Premier and the Minister for Education almost exactly a year ago called 26TEN – 26 for the letters of the alphabet and TEN for the first numbers. Through a network of coordinators, this initiative is an adult literacy

programme delivered by volunteers who are willing to help a mate. These volunteers take a short course delivered by one of our educational institutions and then one of the coordinators will link the volunteer to a suitable learner and the process of learning to read and write, how to use technology, how to solve problems, fill in forms and so on begins. If half the population is functionally illiterate and the other half acknowledged that it had an obligation to teach literacy to the illiterate, the improvement would be dramatic.

All Australians are familiar with the so-called “Anzac spirit” - help a mate - and we need to embrace that attitude and apply it to the problem of functional illiteracy. Last year I spoke to a local audience about the 26TEN programme and said that we need to talk about it in our Rotary, Apex and other social clubs. We need sporting organisations, local councils, unions and community groups to say “we will help”. Helping a mate in this way should become part of our culture; it should become just something that you do to give a hand up to someone who is illiterate. It won't take up a lot of time but it will do a lot of good not only for social inclusion, but also to reduce the percentage of people who are living below the poverty line. At the same time, improving literacy across the country will increase the capacity of the Australian human resource to be creative and energized and thus contribute to the arts and business, making the country more prosperous and a better place in which to live. Everyone should be talking about 26TEN and everybody who is illiterate should understand that that is nothing to be ashamed of and everybody who is literate should be prepared to take part in the programme.

Last month the local newspaper ran a story on the 26TEN programme and said that since it was launched last year, more than 100 organisations have signed on to help. The report says that through the libraries or Learning and Information Network Centres as they are now called - LINC is the acronym - hundreds of volunteer tutors offer their time. There was a photo in the newspaper of 54-year-old Mark Enright. He said that he would like to be a motor mechanic, but his poor reading ability held him back. [quote]"In the old days you just did your job. Now there's a lot of reading and writing required, job sheets to fill in". He took the plunge and thanks his tutor, Anne, for the turnaround in his education. "I've got my first diesel car. I used to get the kids or my wife to look up how to change a diesel filter. Now I do it myself."

So, I unashamedly seize the window of opportunity provided by the title of the presentation to be given by Professors Russo and Daniel to talk to you about functional illiteracy and the 26TEN programme that the newspaper says is unique in this country. I do this because I think that you are the people who are well positioned to help to change the culture of functional illiteracy in the country through programmes like the 26TEN and, because this is such a fundamentally important and widespread problem, I respectfully urge you all to get to work on it.

Thank you.