



# Putting the political back into community education

by Michael Law

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**Adult Learning Commentary, Number 25, 6 September 2000**

In a rash moment, I agreed to run a workshop on this topic during Adult Learners' Week. As it draws closer, I struggle to reconcile a philosophical outlook honed in the 1960s and 1970s with the realities of New Zealand community education today. This contribution, therefore, can be seen as 'thoughts in progress;' this week I am trying to clarify in my own thinking why it is community education is so apolitical. I'd certainly appreciate any insights Australian or New Zealand colleagues can offer.

The first and very positive observation is that there is heaps of political education taking place at the community level in both Australia and New Zealand. In Australia it seems, on the basis of attending 'Popular Education' conferences at UTS, that such education embraces quite a broad agenda and groups.

In New Zealand, however, the nature and scope of grass/flagroots political education is more narrow. The major site, which is largely invisible to pakeha (European) New Zealanders, is within Maoridom. There, structural analysis and issues of sovereignty are systematically examined and debated by adults in a host of settings from language nests through to popular schools rediscovering traditional Maori weaponry. Elsewhere there are pockets of political education rooted in the community: green, free trade, human rights, and other traditional issues. But by and large such efforts are localised and relatively small.

Mainstream community education, from that offered by community houses through high school night classes through to what's left of university extension, has long been sanitised. The origins of this extend well beyond the arrival of neo-liberal (New Right) thinking and practices. One of the ironies of the establishment of the welfare state era is that while it helped bring adult education in from the cold, it also cultivated a notion or set a tone that implied that while the struggle for social justice was not over, it now was more institutionalised. Labour parties and trade unions, along with recognised representative groups (eg The Maori Council) and churches would look after all that through structured systems of political consultation around the social wage and through industrial relations mechanisms that dealt with the earned wage. In this climate, the role of community education was often seen as

therapeutic: occupying adults in their spare time, or helping them adapt to a new environment or some social change, or helping them cope with some personal trauma.

What I think we often lose sight of, is that underpinning this tone, as I call it, was the notion cultivated in the McCarthy era and sustained throughout the Cold War that oppositional politics was 'communistic' or even 'treason.' And often, certainly in New Zealand's case, this was underscored by political bullying.

Neo-liberalism has further complicated this. The fashionable cult of Hayekian individual responsibility claptrap certainly sets a new tone while at the structural level the market model has radically transformed the ways in which organisations and agencies view themselves and people. Once we start thinking about community education agencies as 'service providers' in competition with each other; once we start thinking of learners as 'customers' or 'clients' we are a long way down a very slippery road.

The challenge now is to try and climb out of this hole. What I hope to do in my workshop is latch on to some of the more positive ideas that are coming out of an emerging debate in New Zealand about the purposes of post-secondary education. The Minister of Tertiary Education, Steve Maharey, is into so-called 'Third Way' thinking, although with a stronger social tinge than Tony Blair. Maharey is actually talking about education's responsibility to cultivate democracy and about the 'knowledge society' rather than the 'knowledge economy.' Elsewhere, our Prime Minister, Helen Clark, is emphasising 'closing the gaps,' especially between Maori and Pacific Islanders on one hand and the rest of us on the other.

There is no space here to debate the strengths and weaknesses of these ideas. For the moment what is important, I believe, is working with the concepts. It seems to me that community educators in New Zealand are uniquely placed to work the new debates. To promote educational activities that encourage adults to explore what it means to be democratic; what are the characteristics of a 'knowledge society;' what it requires-structurally-to 'close gaps.'