



**AAPAE NEWSLETTER No 3**  
**15<sup>th</sup> AUGUST 2003**

**IMPRESSIONS of IDEC 2003**

**By Andrew Cathcart**

(Written in 3 parts)

**A first visit to America  
 and the International  
 Democratic Education  
 Conference (IDEC)**

This being in America, is a bit hard to describe. How can I? It's a bit like standing naked in a shower, turning on the controls and then being hit with a downpour of warm water, syrupy cream and bright, yellow mustard mixed with crinkly fronds of rubbery cabbage leaves. How can I tell you?

For example, before I set off, I was quite apprehensive. Americans talk differently and volubly. They have a tendency to extreme violence, are insensitive to non American cultures, and are ridiculously competitive. Many of them are obese. So sitting in a Boston precinct, one warm afternoon, I read that the winner of a National Pickle Eating Contest declares, "I'm proud of what I do. This is a sport and we consider ourselves athletes." I glance up from the newspaper. In front of me, a procession of balloon people in bizarre clothes

waddle past, chomping on food in paper bags.

Two hours later, in the spacious rural setting of an exclusive college campus, red brick buildings, manicured lawns, paved walkways, I loll on the grassy hillside of a football arena. Leafy branches shade me from the sun. Below me, half a dozen, lithesome, sinewy adolescents, effortlessly practice ball skills: the rhythm of running and tapping broken occasionally by the whack of a soccer ball into nets. These kids are Olympians. That bunch in the precinct is from another planet.

And then there's the violence thing. Well in New York City, the guidebooks say 'clutch your bag, stare hard ahead and walk boldly.' The books say nothing about the people who get in the way. New Yorkers say "Hi there", ask you if you are lost, volunteer their services to help you work their poxy ticket machines or when they let you pass, they smile at you. Well after a bit of effort, I managed finally, to be affronted by violence. Ground Zero is a monument to the unthinkable. The scale of the violence

can be understood by the width of the levelled space, the blanked out windows of surrounding skyscrapers and the unceasing procession of visitors. I peer down through observation slots and watch earth movers. Along the hoardings are displayed the names of the dead. Up a little street nearby is an 18<sup>th</sup> century church and graveyard. Inside the altars and walls are festooned with the trivia of that day. A framed photograph shows a pair of boots hanging on the church railings. The accompanying text explains, the Church was used as an Emergency Shelter. Firefighters changed their clothes in its grounds before hurrying into the blazing buildings. Among the 300 who never returned to collect their belongings was one who left his boots on the church railings.

Well then there's this insensitivity to other cultures. Americans are well known for it so to be fair, I need to admit to my prejudices. Their food is one. The luminous, colourful tasty food never quite fails to surprise. Start out with a white plate and by the time you are ready to sit down, you have a colourful heap of gelatinous, easy chew clumps.

So that's my insensitivity out in the open but what about their insensitivity. At mealtime, I talk to a youth. We discuss democracy. Suddenly he holds the plate up to his face and licks it. Below the plate rim, his Adam's apple bobs up and down. At breakfast, another individual, apparently a distinguished speaker on home schooling, carefully places scrambled egg on her toast, folds the toast up with her fingers and then dips the pouch of toast and egg into her coffee. Did you know that although they often begin eating properly their manners deteriorate within seconds? They stop, put down their knife, transfer the fork into the right hand, pick up the knife and then ask you why you have stopped talking. Well I can tell you, at close quarters, personal habits are a

major consideration, intellectual incisiveness is but a trifle.

Education is treated by the media as a sport. The newspaper proclaims "Massachusetts schoolchildren have once again out performed most of their peers across the school sector." Elsewhere the paper reports that the practice of college students using Ritalin and Adderall to enhance their studying has raised several questions; viz: is a drug enhanced score the same as a normal score? Or is a tutor enhanced score the same as a normal score? In this culture, the achievement of a test score that is higher than the test scores achieved by other people seems to be something to crow about.

So what is the IDEC Conference doing? I hear you yawn. Let me tell you. For an average of 18 hours each day, I am listening, talking, working with others to give shape to meanings, issues and practices in Democratic education. I feel I am immersed in idealism. I am among some 450 people from 28 countries who articulate their belief that the best way to educate their children is to give children control of their learning.

These people want their governments to create arrangements whereby parents have the freedom to choose what kind of education they want for their children. They are critical, reflective, earnest and sceptical. Some of them are distinctly egocentric and different from their neighbours. Many of them are inspired, willing to work unsociable hours for low pay and challenge powerful bureaucracies. All of them are normal, even the Americans.

**Why would you have an alternative to the school provided by the State?**

Well there's a thought now. I am actually in Troy University campus, in upstate New York, strolling along a leafy boulevard to the Bush Memorial Hall, You can think thoughts in a place like this. Isn't scholarship wonderful? Three days into the IDEC Conference and in an unremitting stream of workshops and lectures, certain behaviour patterns have emerged.

For example, this warm Saturday evening, on our way to the Hall, Tim and I pass the Conference teenagers lolling on the grassy mound. A lot of skinny flesh seems to be on display. Well enough to distract the casual scholar. The Israeli kids are playing their infernal guitars to the New Zealand girls. The Ukrainian lasses are languishing by the bushes again. No doubt nearby them, the American lads are lurking in furtive attendance. My student days should've been like this, gracious campus settings, low walls, tree lined walkways, phoney Greek temples and Tim for company.

Beneath the stone portal of the Bush Memorial Hall, idle thoughts evaporate. This building is for being serious. The auditorium begins to fill. People dump bags near us. They make themselves comfortable. It's going to be a long, hot night. Along the white walled interior of this lofty hall to Academia, elongated stained glass windows portray Tim in various poses; viz: wrapped in several brown blankets, Tim stands, arms outstretched, looking upwards. Tim sits on a hillock surrounded by sheep etc. I pull out a notebook and start to frame a cartoon about Procrustes. viz; the Procrustes Academy for the Anxious or what about the new Procrustes Exam: a test to prove this child is better than that child? The Ancient Greeks had a talent for simplifying complexities and then exaggerating the heroic qualities required to solve them. Hence Procrustes with his 'one size fits all attitude' could only be overthrown by

Theseus. I mean, where are the heroes in education now?

The speakers are on; Why would you have an alternative to the school provided by the state? Well Rubin Diaz, and remember, we are in his country, is an elected politician. He tells us why. He has a bill before the New York Assembly demanding the right of parents to choose between what the state offers and what they want for their kids' education. "Testing," he thunders" is about exclusion – shutting the doors on my children. And they wanna do well in life." Representing a low income area of New York, he argues that Alternative Schools must celebrate their differences. In his area, Alternative Schools are successful because they meet different needs. He appeals to us, as an International Community to support him.

On Sunday night, the speakers are the Klanskys, an aging pair of activists. They scathingly compare the current mania for testing with the '63 Alabama Literacy test. A notorious test imposed by a Government to exclude people from governing their own affairs. They tell us schools aren't failing today. In fact, Mike Klansky claims, schools are working perfectly. The majority of school kids are being conditioned into thinking of themselves as mediocrities, as being second rate.

The Klansky credentials date back to the Freedom schools created during the '68 Civil Rights Campaign. I recall those days. The Campaign's anthem "We Shall Overcome" reinforced a spirit of optimism that was enveloping our world. Even in deepest Manchester, on a professional level, we demanded a meaningful curriculum for urban kids. On a political level, we sought to bring about the devolution of power.(and a fuse was ignited that snaked all the way to Stormont, but I digress).

This warm, summer evening, the Klansky's are full of passion. The fight for a meaningful democracy must go on. They quote research details to show that the institutional size of a school is a big factor in whether kids stay at school. In ringing tones, Susan Klansky declares "A small school means the difference for a child between being recognized as a person or not being recognized. Thinking big," she continues, "happens best in a small school." She refers to Ella Fitzgerald's obituary and with withering contempt, quotes the wistful comment of the jazz singer's old teacher.

"If only I had known sitting in front of me was the great Ella Fitzgerald. We had too many kids. How could I know her?"

So why would you have an alternative to the school provided by the state? These speakers would say; in the first instance, parents should be able to choose the kind of the school they want for their kids. In the second instance, they would say the schools should be sufficiently democratic to empower their students. And each democratic school would be different from the others because kids are different.

So here in sunny Sydney, let's consider these views. Let's look around us. Is the current trend of increasing uniformity in Education, e.g. the Basic Skills Test, the National Curriculum going to actually improve an individual's experiences in school? The educational system needs more diversity not increasing uniformity. We need educational heroes to overthrow the bureaucrats, those who seek more control of education. And the reality is that in the absence of Theseus, we will all have to be heroic. We will all have to make choices and assert our needs. Here endeth the lesson. In my mind, I'm hurrying away to show those Israeli kids a thing or two about banjo power.

## What about the women at IDEC?

There is a vile, venal, little pub some 20 minutes walk away from the groves of Academe where betimes Tim and I would chance to stray. The name of this hostelry is *The Ruck*. Above the pub door, a sign proclaims the unmitigated ignorance of its owner to any passing Rugby Union fans. Underneath a fanciful coat of arms, the pub sign has the inscription. "The Four Nations Championship."

Nip inside and the aroma of fried hamburgers greets the curious visitor. The gloomy interior is probably deliberate; think distressed railway carriage, low ceiling and a long bar against which are tucked bar stools with arm rests. These elaborately constructed examples of Victoriana, are clearly intended to prevent the inebriated from toppling over and crashing headlong upon the floor. Ah the floor, did I tell you about the floor? Uneven railway sleepers, except for the area by the toilets where the planking gently sinks beneath your feet. To describe the men, rather, robust toilet would be indelicate. However in this little retreat from the intensity of Conference issues, we once talked about the women at IDEC.

My notes about this occasion are not exactly helpful. I have what looks like street directions for the journey from the pub back to the campus in someone else's handwriting, the address of a total stranger, the email of an Irish bar in Hawaii and a visa receipt from *The Ruck*, detailing a remarkable number of dollars. From memory, my companions were Tim, Roger the genial New York secondary teacher who had to rescue Tim from the Big Apple and Larry, who is also a teacher, from Minneapolis.

We had just come from the lecture about Summerhill School, so we started on about Zoe Redhead's inheritance. Zoe, is the daughter of A.S.Neill. She is now the Principal of the school he founded, Summerhill. The incidents that led to the judicial routing of her school's oppressors in the form of Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) actually began a decade earlier. She told us that from 1990, the annual inspections by this business suited squad of gauleiters increased in number as they tried to get her to make her school more like the normal school. And yet the closure notice still came to her, as a shock. "I got on alright with the Inspectors," Zoe told us. In face to face meetings, they would assure her that everything was OK. It was only later when their paperwork came through, she would read their threatening demands for change. Conference applauded her school's vindication. Summerhill still flourishes.

In the benighted calm of ÆThe Ruck, my companions floated their reservations about the place, i.e. Summerhill not the pub. They suggested a school where an alleged disparity among parent incomes meant that some kids came by Rolls Royce and others by bicycle was still exclusive, particularly when the school fees were 8,000 pounds a year. And then there was this murder game that they played. A couple of days ago, a Summerhill game called "Find the murderer", was proposed as a sort of running gag to entertain the youngsters for the duration of Conference. Immediately, like ÆJack in the Boxes, we bounced out of our seats and protested. The language of violence and the values implicit in the game were an affront to our sense of education. Summerhill kids might think a game about murder is OK but not everyone is cocooned from brutality. Roger teaches in the Bronx, Larry was wounded in Vietnam, Tim and I teach down in Lane Cove. And I suppose, this is one of the

things about Democratic schools, they are all different,

"Well at least the women are all the same!" I ventured. My companions gave me a look.

"How so?" they enquired.

"Well..." I began and I probably said words like this; Most School Principals, in the UK, irrespective of gender would have crumbled under the institutional oppression of the Inspectorate. Many would have been fearful of being publicly humiliated for some infringement of school regulations, others would have been only too anxious to please authority. Female Principals are probably even more vulnerable than their male counterparts because political authority in the UK is dominated by males. Consequently, many women are conditioned into thinking that they are less influential than males. Next time you are in the UK, listen when a woman talks to you. They will often mask their regional accent and try to imitate a BBC accent, the voice of authority. Now just put yourself in Zoe's shoes. You're a teacher. You are involved with the children, teaching them. But behind your back, in a remote office, is a powerful, malevolent, authority scheming to destroy your professional work. Well it would be like trying to teach with testicular cancer. My companions nodded sagely. In the West, men can talk like this. It's manly. Zoe Redhead is different, I continued. She's as tough as teak. And why? I put it to you; the reason is because as a child, her school allowed her spirit to develop. If she had gone to a normal school and not a democratic school such as Summerhill, she would have been made to conform, comply, applaud the first XV, the victor ludorum (Ed's Comment – is this a real word Andy?) and all those kids who had the best test results. And remember Zoe Redhead wasn't the only woman we've heard. Remember the teenager, who spoke to Conference about her time as a student

at Albany Free School? Remember her, the fair, curly hair, the infectious laugh? She talked to us about the reasons why at the age of nine, she elected to go to Albany Free School. She told us about her teachers, her enthusiasms, her academic attainment, peer pressure and her aspirations. She was a delightful speaker, full of spirit and humour. She would examine an issue, turn it over and then let it go, with some kind of comment; such as that's cool or that's not for me. She had this irrepressible

appetite for life. Well she and Zoe Redhead are the same. Roger slapped his knee "Gee whiz pardner, you're right!" said Roger. "My bloody oath he is!" agreed Tim. Larry leaned over. "I would deem it an honour suh..." he intoned, in that deep, Western drawl of his, "if you would let me buy you another pint of that thar black beer you're a drinkin!" And so it was, thinking lofty thoughts, in the company of good friends, I passed my time at IDEC.

## **UPDATE on The Grimshaw Review of Non Government Schools in NSW.**

(Combined report by Virginia Neighbour, Cecelia Bradley, Chris Price)

The Department of Education and Training (DET) has circulated a consultation paper for discussion on the implementation of Report 1 of the Grimshaw Review. The paper discusses issues in implementing new requirements for reporting, accountability and planning. The report has been provided to government agencies and about 40 peak groups including AAPAE. AAPAE is not yet part of the peak bodies but with the recent contacts and work on achieving a meeting with the Working Party we are now included as a known 'stakeholder'. AAPAE is preparing a submission in response to this discussion paper.

**On the AAPAE's elist, (ausschools) discussion and comments are informing this submission. If anyone does not have access to this please contact us by phone or in writing if you wish to contribute your views.**

The report proposes that the Education Act be amended, mainly to change the requirements for registration of non-government schools. The central recommendation is that the Act requires schools to prepare an annual report for parents and the community. The report must be publicly available. It is stated that the indicators for the report will include

- performance in statewide tests and examinations
- teacher standards
- retention rates
- enrolment policies and profiles
- student welfare policies
- discipline policies
- complaints and grievance resolution policies
- school-developed improvement targets
- school income and expenditure.

We have been particularly concerned about the first of these points. We are also keeping a close on the teachers standard issue and student welfare and discipline policies and curriculum requirements, keeping in mind the experiences that Boorobin have been having dealing with very similar legislation in Queensland.

Chris, Virginia and Cecelia met with three DET bureaucrats on 30th August - Paul, Helen and Chris, about the possible impacts of the proposed amendments to the Education Act on AAPAE member schools such as Kinma, Currumbena, Blacktown Youth College, Bryon Bay Community School and other NSW progressive & alternative schools.

At the meeting we were reassured that the State Government has no wish to inhibit the operation of schools like ours and the paper in fact notes that not all schools participate in standardised testing. We emphasised the affects of the presence of 'performance in statewide tests' as first indicator for reporting and in registration. We pressed for a positive statement of exemption along the lines of that for the curriculum. They have suggested that we provide the language and they will argue the case for it to the minister. Schools who do not participate in tests will be asked to report on their own methods of assessment. The Act will not specify what schools need to put in their annual reports, and the DET bureaucrats do not think that the government will be keen to provide a statutory exemption from standardised testing, because there will be no statutory requirement to do standardised testing.

The individual registration requirements will be specified in a separate Ministerial directive that is not part of the Act. We still have an opportunity to influence that directive.

The DET people have asked that our submission discuss how we do our assessments and how we can report on them to our communities, so that DET can use this to influence how the Minister words his directive. The idea is that alternatives to standardised testing can be set out in this directive. While this is not as good as a statutory exemption, it is very positive. AAPAE, Kinma and Currumbena are working on developing submissions and it would be beneficial if others likely to be effected do the same.

The main outcome of the meeting is that we do not need to worry too much about the State government taking action that will stop us from being registered or funded. This is very good news for us. More good news is that AAPAE is now listed by DET as one of the education peak groups, so we should be consulted about more issues from now on.

However, we do need to be concerned about the Federal Government's initiatives in standardised testing, so attention will focus once again to take up the task of influencing the Federal Government.

Submissions are due by 29<sup>th</sup> August 2003. and then we wait for the legislation to be tabled. The advice from the AIS that we would not have a chance to respond at that time is not accurate. We will be able to do so.

We put a brief case for looking at the possibility of a NZ type category of schools with special character and were greeted with wry smiles and a sympathetic ear but a strong realistic response that it would be such a major shift of policy for the NSW government because of the power of the larger independent bodies.

They were quite well informed about some of the international examples of this and recognised that we might have more chance in Victoria. What do you think Victoria? I heard a whisper that there might be a review happening in South Australia. If anyone hears anything re details please let us know.

## LATE NEWS



WE can confirm that

## **YAACOV HECHT**

**President of The Institute for Democratic Education in Israel**

is coming to SYDNEY

**18<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup> SEPTEMBER, 2003.**

Some of us were fortunate to meet Yaacov at IDEC in Christchurch 2002 and were inspired by his work and engaging, challenging presentation of aspects of Democratic and Human Rights Education. Others have recently met him at IDEC 2003 in New York. In 1987, he founded the Democratic School in Hadera and was principal there for many years and he also initiated the first International Democratic Education Conference (IDEC) in 1992. He has worked closely with the Israeli government in setting up 22 Democratic Schools in Israel and works with many others to implement aspects of democracy and human rights education into the mainstream schools. In 1995 he founded The Institute for Democratic Education in Israel and is the current president. He was the keynote speaker at IDEC in Christchurch New Zealand in 2002 where he spoke about pluralistic learning, a fresh look at curriculum which is very relevant in the current

Australian educational scene. Recently he was a key presenter at IDEC in Albany State, New York, 2003. He is doing a series of lectures and workshops in New Zealand in September and is able to come to Australia for 3 days.

This is a very special opportunity for AAPAE and we are attempting to organise meetings with politicians and obtain as much media coverage as we can. The schools based in Sydney are very lucky to be able to meet with Yaacov and are helping to organise and attend a public lecture which he will give. If any people from interstate would like to join in please let us know. It is unfortunate that it is just before our own conference and that a double trip will not be possible for many of you. Yaacov's timing and commitments do not make it possible for him to travel in Australia or to attend our conference, but I am sure that the value of the dialogue and communications will flow to all of us.

For more information contact Chris Price or Cecelia Bradley at usual AAPAE contacts.

For all the latest new on

For more information on The Institute for Democratic Education the website is [www.democratic-edu.org](http://www.democratic-edu.org)

## **AAPAE's 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Conference**

being held at

**Pine Community School in Brisbane**

**2<sup>nd</sup> – 4<sup>th</sup> October 2003**

please take special note of the accompanying material giving details.

Word is out that we have people coming from Perth and Adelaide so I hope that encourages a more of you from other states and countries to join us.

Pine Community School's website is <http://www.uq.net.au/~zzpcs/>

**BOOROOBIN Sudbury School** - a Centre of Learning, are still waiting to receive a letter of acknowledgement from the Queensland Non State School Accreditation Board that they have received the 300 page document they submitted in June, to answer the Show Cause Notice which the school had received. They have had no response to the substance of their submission and the fate of their school is unknown. To read more about the situation and the amazing efforts that the Booroobin community have put into dealing with this difficult and time consuming interference by the bureaucracy have a look at the website

<http://booroobinschool.squirrel.com.au/>

Letters of support and protest to Politicians, the Board and the media are very welcome.

Derek has contact details on his site and I can provide them to anyone who does not have email; access.

AAPAE has sent a letter to the Minister and to the Board and plans to send one to the Premier in the near future.

We send warm regards and best wishes to all at Booroobin and hopes that you will soon be able to concentrate your energies fully on the real work with the kids and the community.

### **MAKING AAPAE KNOWN!**

The following is a brief summary of the steps taken so far to broaden our public profile.

**LETTERS** introducing AAPAE to  
 Dr Brendan Nelson (Fed Ed Minister)  
 Ms Jenny Macklin (Fed Shadow Ed Minister)  
 Dr Andrew Reshaugue (NSW Ed Minister)  
 Ms Anna Bligh (Qld Ed Minister)  
 NSW Grimshaw Review of NGS  
 Terry Chapman (NSW Association of Independent Schools) I hope to put copies of these on our website when a spare moment occurs!

### **MEDIA RELEASES to**

The Australian  
 The Age  
 The Sydney Morning Herald  
 Courier Mail  
 The Advertiser  
 The Canberra Times  
 WA & NT papers  
 Independent Education Journal

**MEETING** with Working Party implementing Grimshaw Review NSW

Still to come – all the other State Ed Ministers and Shadow Ministers  
 ANY other Suggestions?  
 ANYONE WILLING TO HELP????????????

Please pass on AAPAE news and information to anyone interested.

I encourage you to join the association as individuals and or school members.

Look forward to seeing many of you in Brisbane.

AAPAE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING WILL BE HELD at the CONFERENCE in BRISBANE. ANYONE INTERESTED IN BEING ON THE COMMITTEE PLEASE CONTACT CHRIS OR CEC. ANYONE INTERESTED IN PROPOSING MOTIONS FOR THE AGM PLEASE CONTACT US WITH YOUR PROPOSAL.



### **Contact Details**

For further information or to join the association contact

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**To join the network send a blank email to**  
**[ausschoolssubscribe@yahoogroups.com](mailto:ausschoolssubscribe@yahoogroups.com)**

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