



**CHRIS KENNY**

The green left is on a sinister mission to create an ideological monoculture



**GEMMA TOGNINI**

Why is life dispensable in some circumstances but not in others?



**CONFECTED OUTRAGE**

Janet Albrechtsen asks why the ABC is afraid of an independent complaints process

# INQUIRER



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Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews; inset, from top, anti-lockdown protesters in the Melbourne CBD; an almost deserted Bourke Street during lockdown in June; and with Scott Morrison at the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne  
GETTY IMAGES, ANDREW HENSHAW/NCA NEWSWIRE



## TEFLON DAN STICKS IT TO HIS ENEMIES

As federal and state elections loom, the divisive clickbait Labor Premier's popularity appears as strong as ever

**JOHN FERGUSON**  
ASSOCIATE EDITOR



It's 10.19am on Thursday and scores of anti-Dan Andrews, anti-vaccination protesters are congregating on the steps of the Victorian parliament building – dog tired but still firing verbal blanks at the Victorian Premier.

The Spring Street crowd looks one part Nimbin, one part Coober Pedy and a tiny bit bikie gang. The steps are messy, the aroma slightly off. Every couple of minutes there is an encouraging beep-beep from a passing car but mostly it's just activism boredom, days after tens of thousands marched against the Andrews government in Melbourne.

Margaret Fullard, who normally works part time in finance, accounts and traffic management, laments the blokeishness that crept into the crowd on Wednesday night and the fact her anti-vaccine stance has split her family and killed her work prospects.

"I'm unemployed because of the pandemic. My dad said no vax, no visit," she says, before adding with conviction: "There are patients out there to use the vax as a tracking device."

As Fullard speaks, the enduringly – his critics would argue bewilderingly – successful Andrews is deep inside the parliament.

The Victorian Premier, closely protected after waves of death threats, is workshoping his lines for a press conference on the easing of restrictions. It was brought forward to try to drown out debate over the deep uncertainty about his pandemic legislation, which was stalled by former Labor powerbroker Adem Somyurek.

The death threats, the use of fake gallows by a small number of protesting extremists and the repeated comparisons of Victoria to Nazism is wearing thin across the political divide, exhausted as the MPs – state and federal – are after nearly two years of fighting the pandemic.

It's a messy day of contradictions for Andrews, who has been the lightning rod for national conservative discontent. Labor badly misjudged Somyurek ahead of his

decision to return to the state parliament to vote against the planned pandemic legislation, which is designed to replace Victoria's current state-of-emergency laws, watering down the influence of chief health officer Brett Sutton.

Victoria's former chief crown prosecutor, Gavin Silbert QC, speaks for many in the law when he says the handling of the pandemic bill – which is still in the balance – has lacked a commitment to accountability.

"It is just arrogant," Silbert says of the government's strategy.

"The best way of putting this is that such powers should never be in the hands of executive government but should always be in the hands of the legislative government – ie, parliament."

Critics of the Andrews government's first attempt to overhaul the pandemic laws include dozens of members of the Victorian Bar and the Ombudsman.

Victoria's exit from virtually all of its virus restrictions this week prompted celebrations in the business community and provoked a competitive NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet to bite: "I'm not going to get compared to Victoria when they've had more days in lockdown than probably anywhere else in the world. What we've done in NSW is get the balance right."

Despite the perceptions of political disarray over the Victorian pandemic legislation, overseeing the world's longest lockdowns, a budget in trauma and a potentially dangerous ideological split be-

tween the extreme ends of the political divide, Andrews remains stronger than ever.

So much so that if an election were held this week, Victorian Labor would have been returned with a similar thumping majority as it achieved in 2018, according to the latest Newspoll.

Things are so bleak for the state Coalition that if the vote broke the wrong way, it could even lose several seats, with eight of its most marginal sitting at less than 1 per cent.

"It's just depressing," a senior federal Liberal MP laments.

For Scott Morrison there is



potential trouble in the Newspoll numbers, with one informed theory saying the state Coalition's brand is being poisoned by Canberra – although there have been plenty of own goals by Matthew Guy's Liberals, including the recent drink-driving disaster by former frontbencher Tim Smith. Federally, the party held only 12 of the 38 seats in Victoria at the last election, topped up by three Nationals, and, party strategists concede, the Prime Minister's mainstream conservatism does not appeal in Victoria in the way that Malcolm Turnbull's pro-

gressive Liberal politics might once have.

Andrews, about to mark his 11th anniversary as Victorian Labor leader and seventh as premier, is as much as anyone responsible for Labor's domination on a state and federal level in Victoria, carefully carving out a political market built on a huge infrastructure build, overt campaigning towards public servants and the unions, and a widely successful pitch to the youth vote that, according to Newspoll, is underpinning his electoral success.

Never mind that the state's nearly seven million people are still recovering from the effects of the crippling lockdowns. All six of them.

On the Victorian state of mind, Andrews reckoned this week: "My assessment of the mood is that people ... yes they have been through a lot and there is healing to be done, there is pain to acknowledge ... but I think people are looking forward."

As far as Newspoll is concerned, Andrews would be more than happy to stay just where he is politically as he hurtles towards his third election win on November 26 next year. If this happens, it will further entrench Victoria as the Labor state where it is rarely beaten – in power for 23 of 27 years if it wins next year, as seems likely.

Newspoll highlights the extent to which the views about Andrews and his government are Balkanised, with an overwhelming majority of 80 per cent of Coalition voters suggesting it's time for an-

other government to be given a go and the same number of Labor voters keen for the ALP to be re-elected again.

The issue is that the Coalition's primary vote is languishing on 36 per cent and Labor is at 44 per cent, handing it a giant 58 per cent two-party-preferred majority.

These observations about Andrews don't seek to paint over the mistakes during the pandemic or the growing challenges facing Labor's strongest state.

In no particular order, Victoria has a poor budget position, its public sector wages bill is ballooning, four ministers recently have been forced to quit because of an anti-corruption probe, the behaviour of the state's largest land manager – Parks Victoria – is worthy of an independent inquiry, the state's major projects agenda is bleeding with cost overruns and heavy delays, and the police force and parts of the judiciary are accused by the right of being politicised.

Then there is the question of the Victorian ALP being placed under control of the national executive over branch stacking, the Red Shirts affair where public money was abused to help get Andrews elected in 2014, and the anti-corruption commission inquiry into one part of the Victorian Right, formerly led by Somyurek.

Much of the criticism nationally is driven by the way Andrews used draconian measures to control the community, particularly last year, when Melbourne was shuttered for a staggering 112 days.

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## Class warfare: battle is joined to raise our teaching standards

The Education Minister is right to focus on evidence-based practices

**PAUL KELLY**  
EDITOR-AT-LARGE



The drive by federal Education Minister Alan Tudge to confront and rectify the generation-long progressive ideological grip on Australian school education – with its consequential decline in standards and performance – now approaches its opening political showdown.

Tudge follows a well-trodden path where past Coalition governments have tried but largely failed. Yet he comes with data of an Australian school crisis that reveals how much students, parents and the community are betrayed by a progressive educational establishment and complacent state governments that refuse to accept responsibility for the decline in the nation's human capital.

The Tudge strategy has three elements: reforming what students are taught by demanding higher standards in the national curriculum; reforming how students are taught by substituting proven knowledge-based learning methods for child-centred instruction; and repairing the disruptive situation in classrooms.

Interviewed by The Weekend Australian, Tudge tells Inquirer: "This debate has been going on for 20 years or more now. There have been improvements but our standards have been slipping internationally and compared to ourselves from 20 years ago. A lot of this is because teacher educational faculties have not equipped teachers with the best evidence-based practices.

"We need less ideology and sociology in teacher training courses and more practical classroom management skills. That means imparting evidence-based practices such as phonics and explicit teaching instruction methodologies."

Tudge's motivation is formed by two decades of Australian failure. When a nation's elites embrace false ideas and entrench those ideas in institutions, the result, as Tudge says, is "a catastrophe for learning".

He wants an end to excuses, complacency and progressive ideology in defiance of results and evidence.

In coming weeks, Tudge will unveil recommendations from the review he established to improve initial teacher education headed by former federal Education Department secretary Lisa Paul. He will also convene a meeting of federal and state education ministers to consider the latest version of the proposed national curriculum following the major revisions he demanded – with the new version reportedly being cut in half from its initial preposterous size of more than 3000 pages.

Tudge issues two warnings. He tells Inquirer: "I won't be approving the revised curriculum documents unless I am absolutely satisfied this is the best possible curriculum we can provide for students." And he holds university education faculties as being responsible for much of the classroom standards failures – and his message to them is "time's up".

Tudge says he is prepared to exercise the "full leverage" of the national government's \$760m that it spends to fund education faculties, to "insist that evidence-based practices are taught". The proposition is simple: medical faculties at universities are

required to impart the proven best available methods to doctors, so why not education faculties to teachers?

The refusal of university vice-chancellors to take responsibility for what is taught is legion, along with their invoking of "independence" to excuse failures. Tudge says "ideally" university leaders should act – but the situation, after so many years, means "we are prepared on behalf of taxpayers to step in and take concerted action".

The Australian paradox is that school spending has surged and school standards have fallen – with little urgency to confront this failure. Too many well-paid and highly regarded education administrators presided for years over a system where hundreds of thousands of students finished with impaired reading while, as leaders, they did virtually nothing to rectify this appalling deficiency.

Jennifer Buckingham, director of strategy at MultiLit and spearhead of the campaign over 12 years to inject phonics back into schools as the proven method to teach reading, highlights the scale of the task Tudge faces.

Buckingham says an earlier review sought to improve accreditation standards for teacher training, and some progress was made. But she subsequently reviewed the way education faculties dealt with literacy and reading.

"They definitely did not reflect the evidence around reading instruction," she tells Inquirer. "They were still caught up in a sociocultural theory of reading, while the scientific basis on reading instruction wasn't given enough weight within their courses. In a primary degree, this

**Tudge says our children are being denied the chance to realise their potential**

should be the most important thing teachers are learning – and I don't think many people would argue with that view of primary school.

"But there has been a philosophical bias towards a sociocultural view of literacy," she says. "Those education faculties have been hollowed out of expertise in how to teach reading. The courses reflect the world view and the research interests of the academics that run them. Over a long period, that has become deeply entrenched and there really isn't any incentive for those faculties to change."

Referring to Buckingham's review, Tudge says she examined 116 literacy units in 66 degrees offered by 38 universities and found only 4 per cent had a specific focus on how to teach reading in early primary school.

Only 16 per cent mentioned phonics and only 8 per cent mentioned explicit teaching, the proven method of superior instruction.

As Tudge says, our children are being denied the chance to realise their potential because "of dogmatic ideological approaches to learning" unsupported by evidence. Fewer than half of all teachers are using explicit instruction methods in most classes, a situation that Tudge says "astounds" him since it should be universal.

This issue goes to the moral compact universities have with

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# Spoken like a true gentleman

Fiercely impartial and always calm, Tony Smith was the best Speaker of modern times

TROY BRAMSTON  
SENIOR WRITER



Tony Smith has an appointment with the Governor-General on Tuesday morning, where he will formally resign as the 30th Speaker of the House of Representatives. Before that, he will preside over the house for the final time on Monday before handing in his resignation letter.

Smith has won praise from the Coalition and Labor for his evenhandedness, authoritative understanding of Standing Orders and the dignity with which he has presided. His election by the house has been unopposed three times.

No other Speaker has achieved that since the first one, Sir Frederick Holder (1901-09).

"Being elected by my Liberal Party colleagues and then by the House of Representatives has been the greatest honour of my time as a member of parliament," Smith, 54, tells Inquirer.

He has served as Speaker during the prime ministerships of Tony Abbott, Malcolm Turnbull and Scott Morrison, and the opposition leaderships of Bill Shorten and Anthony Albanese – from August 2015 to November 2021. He is the longest-serving Speaker since Billy Snedden (1976-83).

The statistics tell the story: 378 sitting days, 372 question times, 7416 questions asked, 1380 divisions, and seven casting votes.

"There are a lot of ways to do this job but the most important thing, I think, was just to be myself," Smith says. "It was also symbolically important to say I would not go to partyroom meetings. I thought that needed to change."

"I have tried to put myself in the shoes of MPs, whether they are under attack or interjecting, and recognising as best I can the ebb and flow of the debate."

"Being impartial, predictable and consistent means MPs know where they stand."

Smith has not been afraid to insist prime ministers remain relevant in their answers, withdraw unparliamentary remarks or even to sit down if the house has become unruly. He has used a mix of humour, silence and direct language to keep order.

"I don't expect them to be happy, but my job is to make sure the house knows that I'm being fair to all and there is not one rule for one side and one rule for the other," Smith says.

Over the past six years, the house has witnessed some of the most significant debates in Australian history, including the vote on same-sex marriage. He issued writs for 13 by-elections, including a record five on one day, many caused by breaches of section 44 of the Constitution over members' dual citizenship.

Smith also grappled with how



Tony Smith presides over the house from the Speaker's chair; and, below, being led to the dais on the day of his re-election in 2019

JAMILA TODERAS (MAIN),  
KYM SMITH



to keep parliament operating during a once-in-a-century pandemic. It required agreement with the government and opposition to allow the capacity for a reduced quorum and to facilitate virtual speaking but not voting.

"It has worked well but I would not like to see it become a permanent feature," Smith says.

"It could be useful for committees but MPs absolutely need to be in the House of Representatives to mix with other MPs, hear different perspectives, and possibly change their views, which is much harder to do if you are not there."

There has also been plenty of controversy, with the government relying on a slim majority of MPs. Smith broke several tied votes with casting votes. The government lost a vote on the medieval legislation. And after Smith determined that the house debate the referral of Christian Porter to the Privileges Committee, the government voted to stop a referral.

"If you are being impartial, you can't worry about the result of votes," Smith says.

"If you are making rulings and

exercising casting votes, you are not voting according to your own view, you are making decisions according to historical principles and best practice."

Section 94a of the Standing Orders allows the Speaker to eject an MP for one hour for disorderly conduct. If an MP is named by the Speaker under 94b, their removal for 24 hours must be voted upon.

"It has been a very good addition," Smith says of 94a. "I have used it in rapid succession and it does lower the temperature of the house." The sometimes boisterous debates of today, however, are nothing like the bitter exchanges during the first decade of the federal parliament. The sittings became so acrimonious as Billy Hughes sparred with Alfred Deakin in 1909 that Speaker Holder collapsed and later died.

The outgoing Speaker pays tribute to the government's leaders of the house during his time and, unusually, the manager of opposition business, Tony Burke, for helping to ensure the smooth running of the chamber.

"I made it clear when I got the

job that he (Burke) could work on the basis of trust and I think he and indeed all members have felt they could raise matters of procedure, rulings and my approach privately," Smith says. "So having that equal relationship with the opposition has been very important in terms of discharging my responsibilities impartially."

Smith, of course, is a Liberal MP. All speakers run the risk of accusations of being too soft or hard on the government or the opposition. That is why, in a throwback to ancient times, the Speaker resists taking the role by linking arms with MPs and pretending to be dragged towards the chair when taking the job.

"I have never had anyone ring up and demand I change my approach or seek to threaten me," Smith acknowledges. "I have had both government and opposition members question and seek clarification on my rulings and approach and, on occasion, as you should expect, have a different view. In terms of disagreements, they have largely been real time and live in question time."

The role of Speaker came to Smith following the resignation of Bronwyn Bishop over a travel entitlements scandal. Bishop, who often presided over a chaotic chamber and had little respect from MPs, was one of the worst Speakers since Federation.

"I became Speaker in sudden and unexpected circumstances," Smith reflects. "A number of colleagues suggested I could do the job given I had been in the parliament for a considerable period of time, even though it was a job that would normally go to older members of parliament."

At age 48, he became one of the youngest ever Speakers. He read House of Representatives Practice, immersed himself in

historical debates and absorbed the Standing Orders.

He also eschewed the wig, decorative collar and gown.

With a love of history, he gained a new appreciation of former Speakers Snedden and Neil Andrew (1998-2004) from the Liberal side, and Harry Jenkins (2008-11) from the Labor side, especially in how they made certain rulings and the consistency of those rulings.

"I could not have done the job without the support, advice and counsel of the former Clerk David Elder (2014-19) and the current Clerk Claressa Surtees," Smith notes. "I encouraged them to be frank and blunt with me in terms

1990 to 2001. He won the seat of Casey, in the outer eastern suburbs of Melbourne, at the November 2001 election. He will not contest the seat next year.

He was "enormously honoured" to serve as parliamentary secretary to John Howard in 2007.

Smith served in several shadow portfolios but was overlooked for a ministry when Abbott became prime minister. He chaired a number of committees, including on electoral matters. Working across the chamber was a good grounding for being Speaker.

Smith is reluctant to advise MPs how the house could function better. But he does think recommendations by the clerks to the Procedure Committee to reform question time – such as reducing the time for answers from three minutes to two – have merit.

"The next parliament would be wise to consider implementing them in the future for the benefit of all members – leading to tighter questions and answers, and more opportunities for a larger number of questions and answers," he says.

He would also like to see a greater emphasis on educating young Australians, especially high school students, about government. "Our democracy needs constant nourishment," Smith says. "Civics education is important, and we should do as much as we can to encourage it."

Smith would like to finish his time in parliament on the backbench, allowing him to speak more freely. "I won't raise points of order unless absolutely necessary," he promises. "I just want to reflect on a few things and thank my constituency who have been very good to me over the past 20 years."

It is another mark of respect for the house from the best Speaker in modern times.

**'I don't expect them to be happy, but my job is to make sure the house knows I'm being fair to all'**

TROY BRAMSTON  
OUTGOING SPEAKER

of advice because that would enable us as a team to do the best job possible. Their knowledge of procedure and history is without parallel."

There is much more to the job than presiding over the house. "The Speaker and the president of the Senate are responsible for all the operations at Parliament House," Smith notes. "It is a busy and vibrant building. There is also a significant diplomatic role – meeting with delegations from other parliaments, and ambassadors and high commissioners."

Smith learned the art of politics as media adviser and then political adviser to Peter Costello from

# Bar humbug to the claim women are the 'victors' in law

The statistics are clear – female barristers are still a long way from enjoying parity with men

NAOMI SHARP

Was the opinion piece of my colleague Jeffrey Phillips SC in these pages last week – "Bar ballot reveals women are the victors, not the victims" – anything more than consternation that this year an equal number of male and female barristers were elected to the Bar Council? Which itself is unremarkable in recent years.

In a curious leap of logic, Phillips blamed this apparently disturbing outcome on the NSW Bar's Equitable Briefing Policy and the existence of the Women Barristers Forum. Phillips invited us to scrutinise why in our "modern times" we organise "on the basis of gender alone". This invitation stands at odds with the lack of scrutiny displayed in his opinion piece. It is a case of dispensing the medicine without taking it. In particular, Phillips offers no support at all for the claim that the NSW Bar's Equitable Briefing Policy "disproportionately benefits the well-connected".

The simple fact is, while there have been terrific improvements in recent years, the Bar does not yet reflect the diversity of the people starting their careers in the legal profession as solicitors, those who are studying law or the public more generally. NSW Bar Association statistics reveal that of the 2459 practising barristers in NSW, only 603 (25 per cent) are women. Of the 407 silks, only 56 (14 per cent) are women. These figures do not scream out equality to me.

And the statistics become even more stark when further scrutiny is applied, particularly in terms of appearances in courts and in the continuing gender pay gap. For instance, in the year to April 2018, only 18 per cent of all appearances (that is, speaking parts) were by female barristers in the NSW Supreme Court. It remains overwhelmingly the case that the most well-remunerated work at the Bar goes to men (particularly at more senior levels of the Bar) and that private sector briefs (which are generally the better-paid ones) still go disproportionately to men.

Sadly, it is still a rare day in the highest court in the land, the High Court, when a female barrister appears in a speaking role and to lead the team.

In common with many other Australian institutions, structural inequality long permeated the Bar. As pointed out by the Chief Justice of NSW Tom Bathurst in his February address, Trust in the Judiciary, the reality is that the system at the Bar ran substantially on patronage. Patronage conferred benefits on men, al-

most always to the exclusion of women. Indeed, it was only one or two generations ago that chambers regularly refused to license rooms to women to permit them to practise at the Bar at all.

The Equitable Briefing Policy is exactly what it purports to be – a policy to encourage equitable access to briefs. It is one lever to help dismantle long-term structural inequality. Its purpose is to drive cultural change in the legal profession, support the progression and retention of female barristers, and address the significant pay gap and under-representation of women in the superior courts.

Phillips also complains of that "tightly organised interest group", the Women Barristers Forum, which he charges with the offence of organising various "separate" events for women. As chair of WBF, I do agree that we are well-organised, which is a testament to the dedication of our executive who volunteer their time and energy. The WBF events of which Phillips complains are in fact ones at which all members of the Bar are welcome to attend and do attend. I did not hear any complaint from Phillips regarding the barristers' cricket team or boat race team, although they are "tightly organised" too. The WBF has played an important role in promoting camaraderie at the Bar and supporting women in what is still a heavily male-dominated profession.

Ultimately, equality is hard fought for and easily lost without active effort, vigilance and courage. Policies that promote equality such as the Equitable Briefing Policy and organisations such as WBF, which promote diversity and inclusion, are to be applauded rather than derided. Thanks to the courage and perseverance of many brave women and men, women are now genuinely welcomed at the Bar, and are increasingly taking their rightful positions as leaders in our profession. Diversity is now recognised as the strength it is. That benefits not only the Bar, but consumers of legal services and the public more generally.

Phillips's views do not reflect the commitment to diversity and equality that now prevails at the NSW Bar, which is a far more welcoming place to women than in former times. That proposition finds some support in the fact 11 of 21 members of the newly elected Bar Council are female.

Naomi Sharp SC is chair of the NSW Women Barristers Forum, a section of the NSW Bar Association.



# Battle is joined to restore our teaching standards

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the nation – supposedly upheld by vice-chancellors – whereby they combine a liberal arts education with professional vocational training, yet in education they have allowed over years an ideological disposition to prevail that is contrary to the science of learning.

The recent 2018 Program for International Student Assessment showed long-term Australian decline in reading, maths and science compared with other 15-year-olds around the globe. Our own performance is regressing. The average Australian student is more than one full year behind 2003 levels in maths, almost one full year behind 2006 levels in science and a full year behind 2000 levels in reading. In reading, only 59 per cent of year 9 students reached the "proficiency" standard.

Some individual schools perform strongly but Australia's decline is across all categories – poor, middle and top students. Given this background, Tudge was further astonished when he saw the

draft national curriculum released this year by the independent Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority.

"It does not increase standards," Tudge said in response. "It has a negative view of our history and is a ridiculously long and unwieldy document at 3500 pages."

"The peak mathematics association expressed 'alarm' at the draft and asked them to start again. Evidence-based content, such as phonics, was minimised. The biggest problem, though, was in the draft history curriculum. It downplayed our Western heritage. It omitted significant figures in our history such as Menzies, Howard and Whitlam. It almost erased Christianity from our past."

"Put simply, I would not support it. I have been crystal clear in my views to ACARA that significant rework was required to address these flaws."

Tudge has been given assurances across the reworking version, which he said on Friday, he still has not seen. He takes some confidence from these assurances.



Alan Tudge

But he remains concerned "that the updated curriculum does not lift standards".

This is the point the educational experts are reluctant to grasp – when performance is failing, significant change is essential. This is how rational democratic societies are supposed to function. How hard is this concept to grasp?

Tudge says the revised curriculum will be considered by state and federal education ministers early next month. Asked if he is prepared to send the latest curriculum back for another revision, Tudge is noncommittal. It must surely be an option.

In his speech last month to the Centre for Independent Studies,

Tudge quoted the experience of principal and teacher Sue Knight, who has written about discovering she had not been taught the science of reading in her teaching degree: "There were many mixed feelings: shock that this information was out there but not in my hands, given I had an education degree; devastation at the number of children who had moved through my classroom or school and I could have been doing so much more for them."

At the time, Tudge warned the universities: "If you are not adequately preparing student teachers to become effective classroom teachers using evidence-based practices, you should not be in the business of teacher education."

Tudge's priority is to lift the quality of teaching, since teachers are the largest single in-school driver of student achievement. He wants more of the brightest school-leavers heading into teaching. That means reversing the trend, because since 2006 there has been a 32 per cent decline in the proportion of high achievers entering education degrees.

He wants to attract more mid-career professionals into teaching, particularly those with maths skills – which must mean a short entry and training process for such pro-

fessionals. He backs better pay for teachers, saying the best teachers "are not paid enough" – the problem being that teachers at their career zenith are paid only 40 per cent more than those in their first year out from university.

"I think Australian parents are concerned that Australian education standards have declined over the past 20 years," Tudge tells Inquirer. "A lot of parents had a greater opportunity to see inside the classroom during the pandemic while their kids were doing remote schooling. On many occasions they were in awe of the professionalism of teachers, and on other occasions they probably felt things could be done better."

"Parents want kids to be taught well in the basics, have a good understanding of Australian history, be proud of our country and want to make a contribution when they graduate. I don't think that's too much to ask for."

Asked how the stalemate in university education faculties can be unlocked, Buckingham says more pressure must be brought to bear: "We could put more standards around what universities must do in order to be accredited for teacher training. This is what Mr Tudge has talked about."

"The other way is for employers

– the state education departments – to make greater demands of universities about what they expect from teachers. In NSW, for example, there has been a big shift towards evidence-based practice in literacy instruction. But most education faculties are producing teachers who know very little about the sort of practices they will need once they begin teaching."

In relation to the debate about history, it is noteworthy that historian Geoffrey Blainey conducted a test – since Australia was the first nation in the world to grant women both the right to vote and the right to stand for parliament, such an achievement would deserve a mention in the curriculum. Alas, he reported last May that "so far I have found no mention of this victory in a curriculum of enormous length".

Blainey said the year 7 syllabus was "breath-taking", covering a number of civilisations, but students could only study two and the First Nation Peoples of Australia was compulsory. He said students should learn about Aboriginal history but why not Greece and Rome as "the mainsprings of the civilisation most Australians inherit"? Reviewing the period 1750 to 1918, Blainey found "a strong bias against mainstream Australia".

Tudge agrees. He says he wants "an accurate and balanced" view of our history but concludes the curriculum suggests "that nothing bad happened before 1788 and very little good has happened since". Tudge says the curriculum needs to tell the story of Australia as a liberal democracy – if students are not taught about this defining achievement they will hardly think of themselves as making a contribution to the democracy or developing pride in country.

He says the curriculum needs to tell both stories – the Indigenous experience and the liberal democracy narrative. Having worked with Noel Pearson in Cape York before entering parliament, Tudge told the ABC he backed the Pearson framework – Australia as a project based on three pillars: the Indigenous foundations, the British/Western heritage, and the multicultural modernisation.

That control is now threatened because the documented decline in school standards and performance cannot be ignored.

Progressive ideas are failing in education. They are failing students, parents and the economy. The case against them is not the culture war, it is knowledge war – the perpetuation of models, practices and ideology that are inhibiting full human potential and a foundation of shared values.

For a decade, the education debate was dominated by the Gonski reports and implementation. Massive spending was devoted to schools on an equity and social justice basis inspired by fine ideals. There have been improvements, but the larger story cannot be denied – we didn't get the advances we hoped for, or the advances the money should have delivered. The Labor Party needs to confront this.

The reason goes to the failure to address the elemental issues at source – what was being taught, how it was being taught, the quality of teaching, the culture of the classroom, and why other nations were passing Australia.

Paul Kelly is a director of the Australian educational charity Primary Focus.