

**Flowering, fading and facing the facts:
World Education Fellowship in Queensland– 1970 to 2005**

Margaret Henry

In the 1960s when our family moved to live in Brisbane and eventually connect with community affairs, the Queensland Section of the World Education Fellowship was closing up shop. It had been a great Section under the Presidency of Sir Fred Schonell, but in the late 1960s it went into abeyance.

Discovering this from Sydney, my mother Clarice McNamara, one of the founders of WEF in Australia, pressed a few levers and started it up again. It was the kind of quiet, far-reaching move that marks the great organiser. She wrote to Anna Cowen, wife of the new Vice-Chancellor of Queensland University, Professor Zelman Cowen, who had come to Brisbane from the University of New England. There Mother had met Anna through their contact with a flourishing WEF group in the local city, Armidale. In her letter Mother suggested that Anna might like to get in touch with her daughter Margaret who would be interested in helping to revive WEF in Queensland.

I was surprised and pleased to hear from the wife of my husband's new supreme commander at the University, we met in company with a longstanding friend of ours, Joyce Vaughan, and hey presto – in 1970 WEF was relaunched.

Looking back over WEF's last 35 years in Queensland, I want to reflect on what made WEF in Queensland a great organisation, what has caused it to fall over at this time, and what—peering mistily into the future—might cause it to revive.

A publicity leaflet we published in 1997 asked the question: **WEF—WHAT DOES IT OFFER?** The following three answers then appeared:

A unique format

There are many educational organisations that advance specific groups and specific areas. WEF is unique because:

- it's open to ALL of us interested in education
- it addresses All educational topics.

The breadth of WEF can enrich our thinking and planning, as insights from one area shed light on another.

Focus on individuals in the community

We need to understand the values underlying educational issues. WEF meetings and the journal *New Horizons in Education* help us to clarify:

- What's in it for me?
- What's in it for the community?

An independent tradition

WEF has no political or religious affiliations. It was formed to promote educational reform and repair relationships after the hatreds of World War 1. It has existed ever since in Sections throughout the world, and still offers both a forum and a fellowship.

These two aspects, WEF as forum and as fellowship, were what especially appealed to our Coordinator-Treasurer for over 32 years, Joyce Vaughan. Quite apart from a succession of inspirational Presidents, WEF had Joyce. A past secondary English teacher, Joyce's role in "what made WEF in Queensland a great organisation" could hardly be better summed up than it was at her funeral last year at the age of 94 when Sandra Kenman spoke about her own introduction to a WEF meeting 17 years ago:

I may have been a bit unsure about this WEF organisation, but I certainly knew I was in the right place when I saw a beautifully groomed organizer behind the registration desk. Joyce, the coordinator (she objected to being described as merely the treasurer) was in her element before, during and after such events. She was marketing manager extraordinaire, the best editor, an experienced events coordinator, and a determined recruitment officer. Not many people could sign in without being encouraged by Joyce to join WEF. She would diligently follow up the event with thank you letters, news articles, detailed financial records, and more recruitment tactics. She had an eagle eye for spotting someone who could contribute at a committee level.

Whether she was driven by her passion for WEF, or her need to stimulate her intellect, or simply to build an extended family, I am not sure, but she had a wonderful ability to encourage others to contribute and make everyone feel valued. She was forever saying 'John, I am sure you can do that...Wayne would know who to contact...We must have a session organized by Margie...Val has wonderful ideas...what do you think Jack'...and so on. I am sure many of us went to meetings (which used to be at Joyce's house before we moved to Margaret's) with intentions of cutting back on our involvement, only to leave with passionate determination to fulfil the goals and objectives of WEF. This was truly a 'fellowship', a continuation of caring people working together to provide a public forum for what we saw as needed debate.

Our double role as a forum and a fellowship has meant that, over the last decades, WEF in Queensland has been a **democratic** educational organisation. As our leaflet said, it has been open to, has shared ideas with, and has been controlled by "ALL of us interested in education". Of what other educational body could one say that? Universities are not democratic in that

sense—one must be an academic achiever to belong. Private schools impose restrictions on the students they take. Professional organisations are open only to members of that profession. Public schools are not equally controlled by all their stakeholders.

It is a constant, ongoing job to ensure that the control of an organisation remains democratic—that is, transparent and cross-representational. As a child I heard about attempts by a religious group to take over WEF, attempts which caused a split in the organisation's early British-European membership. In my teenage years in Sydney I saw an attempt to take over WEF by a group of Catholics, and, on another occasion, an attempt to take over WEF by a group of Communists. What saved WEF from these takeovers? The fact that the democratic membership had elected a democratic council who voted to keep a cross-representation of the community running the organisation: teachers, parents, students, business people, employees, community members, academics. Such a democratic, cross-sectional representation of the community is what WEF will always need if it is to be, as its constitution describes it, "a clearing house of ideas".

These ideas discussed and debated in WEF have thus also been democratic in their range. Look at the diversity of the following meetings, all emanating from the Queensland Council, all well supported, all with speakers proposing differing views, all encouraging discussion. These comprised just some of the program in 1996-7.

Pupil Assessment – Who ever got taller by being measured?

'Some do', said one speaker, because more resources often follow the measuring.

Asian Language Teaching at Primary Level

Comments from the floor stressed the value and enjoyment of learning even a little of a new language.

Now for the Future: Play, the Arts and Life

A night of creativity for adults and children, focused on the environment.

School-based Management

Who is going to control our schools?

English Round Table

A dinner with overseas students, held at a restaurant.

Flexible Delivery Strategies into the Next Millennium

Multimedia and the Internet.

WEF Annual Dinner

Educating on the Inside: Lessons from mothers and children in prison.

Educating Early for Equal Rights: How?

An evening for teachers and parents.

As late as December 2004, Queensland WEF played a major part in educational thinking when the proposal suggested by our President, Denis Feeney, was adopted by the WEF Australian Forum to become the foundation of a week-long Australian Conference held in Adelaide by UNESCO, WEF and other partners. The topic: **Education for Shared Values for Intercultural and Interfaith Understanding.**

If WEF in Queensland has been so successful, why are we going into recess? The answer is that in the last year or so both membership and meeting attendances in this state have fallen catastrophically. Rather than being captured by a takeover group, I believe we have been taken over by the current climate of society—basically by economic rationalism. Educational resources are further and further stretched; professional demands are further and further imposed. Teachers, working parents, community members interested in education are exhausted come nightfall, come weekends—they must catch up on their rest or their marking or their reporting or their planning. They have neither time nor energy for a Saturday morning

conference on **Educating for Democracy: How Can Schools and Homes Better Promote It?**

A morning with splendid speakers which attracted a group of twelve. Despite the positive Biblical precedent of this number, we decided that in this case it represented the finale. We were glad that Joyce had not been here to see it. We thought that we too had better take a little rest.

So what of the future?

Just as political figures and parties despair of ever getting back into office, yet fight on regardless and sometimes eventually succeed (Whitlam, Howard, Winston Peters), there is no reason to think WEF in Queensland will not rise again, as it has in other states of Australia.

That we are both a forum and a fellowship may not seem a solid enough base on which to mount a revival, but this democratic mandate has in the past been viewed as a powerful force—indeed a seditious one. Some years ago, during the long reign of Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen, educational organisations were invited to report on their activities to the Queensland Ministry of Education. My colleague Jennifer Riggs and I, from our Council, fronted the investigating committee in Parliament House. As we spoke to our report about the pluralism of WEF, we emphasised the broad range of views always presented on important educational topics, and the encouragement to participants to discuss and determine their own views. This led some members of the investigating committee to express their grave concern about the organisation's pluralism. Jennifer and I felt as proud as dissidents at a show trial.

For WEF in Queensland to rise again, I believe we shall have to wait till the grinding forces of “economic rationalism”—extreme competition accompanied by exhaustion in many community areas—are mitigated by a rise in the humane values associated with social capital.

When/if this happens, we might remember a passage from Clarice McNamara's unpublished autobiography cited in *New Horizons* No 104, June 2001. She is recalling (p. 28) the words of the organisation's world founder Beatrice Ensor at its Australia-wide 1937 Conference. Over five hundred delegates had crowded into a Sydney University classroom to launch the NSW Section.

When we were all seated, many on the floor, in came our illustrious world leaders. Beatrice Ensor looked round the large crowd of excited teachers and laughed. ‘You're far too many,’ she said; ‘You'll never last. We started in 1920 with eight people. You have to start small and move slowly. Education reform is much harder than you think. But good luck to you anyway!’

Mother records that though the membership did diminish as Beatrice had predicted:

Nothing deterred, a number of us went on working for the Fellowship, through lectures, dinners, conferences, weekend schools, literature and press articles. We had become part of a great world fellowship, which for many of us enriched our lives, our work, our relationships in home, school and society.

We worked hard to help achieve much needed reforms in education: abolition of examination pressure, abolition of corporal punishment in schools, introduction of much more interest and creativity in the classroom. In short we advocated and demonstrated

teaching through joy, affection, intrinsic interest and creativity, never through fear and force.

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