

# Culturally adrift without classical moorings

A return to Latin and ancient Greek would make for a real education revolution, writes Dan Ryan

**MY** grandfather, who spent most of his life on a sheep station in western Queensland, could quote tracts of Virgil and Homer from memory. My mother topped Latin in year 10 in her school in Brisbane in the 1960s, but things were on the slide; her prize was a copy of the Iliad not in Greek but in English, and in an abridged form, with all the poetry stripped away.

By the time I went to school there was apparently no need to teach the classics any more. They were dead languages and, besides, there was not enough time in the school day to fit them in between classes in home economics, woodwork, typing and the like. How sure are we that the effective elimination of the classics from our education system has been without consequence?

Educators once believed in the classical education very strongly. Little more than a generation ago you could not get into Oxford or Cambridge without demonstrating competency in Latin, and practically every Western historical figure and writer until the 1950s was taught the classics from an early age. The line of thinking that we don't need to learn Latin and Greek because they are too hard, irrelevant, not useful or not the languages of the future would have been regarded as the argument of philistines.

The rationale was not always stated explicitly; it was simply understood. A classical education was needed first of all to impart content -- to maintain basic Western cultural literacy. Your understanding of the West would be necessarily incomplete and superficial without a good acquaintance of the Aeneid, the works of Ovid and Aeschylus, the speeches of Pericles and Ci-

cero, and the Homeric epics. The second reason, as classicist Tracy Lee Simmons emphasises in his excellent book *Climbing Parnassus*, was that learning these hard ancient languages had a point in itself -- it required students to focus on the precise meaning of words, making them less patient with sloppy language and thinking. For Westerners, only the languages of Latin and Greek can perform this role.

The high-minded hope was that the combination of the content and the process would make us better able to govern ourselves, both individually and as a society. To know a liberty fit for men, not animals. What does it say that we are now fixated about becoming Asia-literate, but that there is no concern about the obvious decline in Western cultural literacy levels?

I am not saying that one should not learn Asian languages or have a deep interest in the cultures of Asia. I speak and read Mandarin and have been learning since university days. I ended up marrying a Brit who speaks Punjabi, Hindi and Urdu. Whether spending \$11 billion on compulsory mass Asian language education training from year 3 onwards would result in a net economic gain or otherwise make sense is something others can duke out. From what I've seen so far of the plans, colour me highly sceptical.

What I do strongly believe is that one's understanding of the East will, in the long run, be hindered unless you have a proper understanding of the West. Lawrence of Arabia would have thought the lack of Latin and Greek a terrible obstacle to the understanding of Arabic. William Jones, the famed San-

skrit scholar, would have thought likewise with regard to understanding the languages and cultures of the subcontinent. The same holds true for the languages of East Asia. Australia's pre-eminent Sinologist, Pierre Ryckmans, was educated in Europe. I bet my bottom dollar he was taught Latin during his formative years. It shows in his writing style and liberal mind.

Without a decent acquaintance with the Western classical heritage we are dooming ourselves to a glib relativism born of ignorance, to being forever trapped in the parochialism of the present, to being a nation adrift without a cultural anchor.

What is needed is not a new state education plan. The renewal is unlikely to come via our sclerotic state-directed command-and-control education system that governs both fee-paying and non-fee-paying schools. *Carthago delenda est.*

If there is a renewal, I suspect it will be through less mainstream institutions like Sydney's Campion College, through teachers with a deep love of Western culture, and through some of the classically educating home schooling families I have been honoured to know.

It will come when we realise that it has been a terrible dereliction of duty not to pass on "the best that has been thought and said" to the next generation and we are not going to let it continue. Now that truly would be an education revolution.

*Dan Ryan is a general counsel to a leading information technology company. He has worked in Hong Kong and China for 10 years.*  
Article from *The Australian*

# Many young mayors have become the youngest to be elected

GENERATION Y, the stay-at-home children of the digital era, are flexing their muscle in local government, led by an influx of mayors.

Many young councillors have become the youngest councillor or mayor to be elected to their municipalities.

The number of young councillors taking the top job rose in last month's mayoral elections.

The Herald Sun spoke to six of the Generation Y mayors and found the tech-savvy youngsters keen to revamp councils' stuffy reputation.

After just one year as councillors, Tim Smith and Steve Staikos, both 26, were elected mayors of Stonnington and Kingston cities respectively.

They say they have big expectations of what they can achieve this year.

Cr Smith said his younger sister and parents were shocked, but thrilled, when he won the mayoral election.

"I don't think they were that involved in the process, but when it actually happened they were very surprised and very happy," he said.



Steve Staikos, 26, of Kingston council; Alex Makin, 29, of Maroondah; Tim Smith, 26, of Stonnington; Monash deputy mayor Stephanie Perri, 29; Charles Pick, 25, of Manningham; and Stephen Tang, 26, of Glen Eira. Source: Herald Sun

Cr Staikos said his family and friends first urged him to run for council and his Greek immigrant parents are delighted he holds the top job.

"They are stoked that within such a small amount of time they've gone from being immigrants and getting their citizenship to Australia, and

now one of their sons has become mayor of their city," he said.

Maroondah mayor Alex Makin and Manningham mayor Charles Pick join Cr Smith in being the youngest councillors ever elected in their areas.

Cr Makin, 29, was elected to council in 2005, and besides

running his own marketing and IT company has brought the council into the digital age by introducing online interaction and blogging.

Cr Pick, 25, was elected at just 22, when he sat on council with five councillors over 60. This year will be his second consecutive year as mayor.

"I've got my vision. I know I'm there to represent the sort of big-picture items that I've been fighting for," he said.

Glen Eira mayor Stephen Tang, 26, has one year of study left to complete his double degree in law and commerce at Monash University, but has juggled his studies with the job of mayor before, in 2008. "My family were not as shocked as I was. They had a belief in me," Cr Tang said.

"I thought I was fortunate to receive the voters' support, but they were confident," he said.

"Glen Eira council needed a new start, and what says new start better than a young face?" he said.

Monash council is run by the female duo of mayor Char-

lotte Baines, 27, and her deputy Stephanie Perri, 29.

Cr Baines, the youngest female mayor in the council's history, became a councillor in 2005 after interacting with councillors in her role on the Monash Arts Council.

The qualified lawyer and PhD student decided she wanted to be involved in the "bigger picture" by becoming a councillor, and was "excited and humbled" that all her colleagues supported her bid to become mayor.

Cr Perri said it was refreshing that the number of women elected to Monash council had risen while the general average had fallen, and that the council could represent all age groups.

"Having a diversity of ages across the council is fantastic. We've got a range of people across all age groups represented on council," she said.

As for the ambitions of these young councillors, they include academic research, a legal career, continuing in local government, and even a run for State Parliament.

Article from *The Herald Sun*