

Three years that tried to shake our world



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How long does it take to make a revolution? In 1776 the Intercontinental Congress in Philadelphia took June and the first week of July to draft and subscribe to the Declaration of Independence. It took a few wars for Britain to accept it. But the American Revolution was declared and explained with remarkable brevity.

The French were a little more chaotic. In 1792 the monarchy was abolished, but the revolution is usually dated to the storming of the Bastille three years earlier. The Russian Bolsheviks were methodical and ruthless in their October Revolution of 1917.

So how goes Australia's revolution? You didn't know we had one? Kevin Rudd and the Labor Party declared the "Education Revolution" at the beginning of 2007. They said it would go through various phases, and spent a lot of treasure on it. By now we should be showing results.

The first part of the revolution was equipment. The government promised a computer on the desk of every student in years 9 to 12. But there isn't. Not even one for every two desks. You couldn't share one between three. The government got its sums wrong and didn't allocate enough money for the back-up and the installation. It illustrates why we need to improve education – ministers need better numeracy standards – and showed this would be a revolution bigger on promise than delivery.

The next phase was to roll the revolution over to buildings. The government announced it was "Building the Education Revolution" with new halls and canteens in every school whether they were wanted or not. This would be revolutionary and "save" the economy by spending about \$1.5 billion.

The BER stimulated a lot of inventive claims for project management fees and inflated building costs. It completed some useful projects, and some useless ones – like the hall at Hastings Public School, which is too small to hold the 39 students, and the canteen at Orange Grove Public School, nice but too small to fit a pie-warmer.

That great revolutionary Josef Stalin claimed that to make an omelette you have to break a few eggs. BER delivered breakages and spillages all over the country. Whether the omelette is worth \$1.5 billion is the question. The BER "stimulus" is still being rolled out, even though we now have an unprecedented mining boom, with interest rates rising.

Julia Gillard says the revolution delivered the My School website that gives information on how students in each school compare with national averages. And that is a good idea. But one website does not a revolution make. If the literacy and numeracy standards showed persistent improvement against historical benchmarks and improvement against other countries, that would be an achievement. If the revolution is about anything, it should be about improving results.

After three years of revolution, it was a surprise that last weekend, when the PM announced her ministry, there was no one described as an education minister. This was once her No. 1 priority. Later it was clarified there would be two ministers for education – Chris Evans for tertiary and Peter Garrett for schools – a kind of duumvirate to lead the revolution.

Both men are polite and sensitive. Neither is a fire-breathing reformer. Evans was in charge of stopping the tide of asylum seekers in his last ministerial role. The fact all of the asylum facilities are overflowing gives you some idea of how effective he was and why he had to be moved. And when you talk of ministerial fire it is not effectiveness that comes to mind with Garrett, but insulation batts and house fires. He is lucky to still be a minister.

Their appointment tells us how low a priority the education revolution has become. The sooner it moves out of public consciousness the happier Gillard will be. Don't expect too many more signs to be erected proclaiming the education revolution.

After three years, our Australian revolution is starting to look a bit like Castro's. He's been going 50 years and promises improvement is just around the corner. Cubans like to humour their leader. They know the truth but they keep up the joke. Australians are best advised to do the same. We know the revolution is an expensive fizzer, but we are polite and do not remind our Comrade Leader. She will bury it in her own good time.

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