Tall Poppy Syndrome

“Concerned principal of Redwood Tree Secondary College”
The Herald Sun 2/12/13

“Studying hard again, are we?”

“Yeah, I’ve got a SAC next period.”

“Mate, it’s always you I see studying every day. Just relax dude - look at everyone else. We are all pretty chilled.”

A worrying issue has been dogging me recently and overhearing this conversation in the Year 12 centre has crystallized a lingering theory of mine. These past few years, a palpable atmosphere of gloom has slowly pervaded my once lively senior school. Haunted and wary, VCE students trudge through the school gates every morning – it is distressingly consistent with the unprecedented levels of depression and stress reported by the Student Welfare counselors. This, coupled with alarmingly declining academic standards, has supported my suspicions about the intrinsically Australian phenomenon of the “Tall Poppy Syndrome”.

The syndrome is rooted in colonial Australia, where whole groups of convicts were left on Sydney beach to receive a ‘healthy’ dose of the Australian sun due to the insolence of a single “tall poppy”. Inevitably, any budding poppies were viciously cut down by their desperate mates out of self preservation. After long periods of submission under the Red Coats, the seeds of an insidious inferiority complex and a twisted admiration for Mother Britain (not unlike the Stockholm syndrome) have germinated. Today, Australians degrade Australian culture as unquestionably inferior to that of others’ and any tall poppies intending to advance or promote our cultural identity are promptly ridiculed and rejected. This national state of liminality is perhaps most evident in the general Australian preference of Melbourne over Sydney simply because it is ‘more European’, or that only a meager 25% of Australia’s television time actually airs Australian shows. Clearly, this over reliance and feeding off other cultures is an endemic desire to ratify our inextricable union with the mighty U.S, repressing and masking our true spirit and originality.

It is this pervasive phenomenon that conflicts with the ranking system of VCE. The ATAR is a hierarchical construct that positions students across the nation according to their academic ability. All of a sudden, diligent students who hope to use education’s golden opportunity to secure a brighter future for themselves are labeled as ‘elitists’, trying to be superior to the cohort, and thus, seemingly the need arises to cut them down to size. Inevitably, they are forced to maintain an indifferent, ‘chilled’ artifice in order to assimilate and fly under the Tall Poppy radar. This often entails avoiding work at school while frantically cramming in study at home, away from the scrutiny of others. Needless to say, this tightrope balancing act is detrimental to their individual psyche and academic achievement, leaving them vulnerable to anxiety or resulting in too many a student failing to make the cut for their dream career. How absurd that countless opportunities for success are being squandered in a fortunate first world country like Australia simply because our anti-elitism ethos demands widespread mediocrity. Having read a conveniently named “Tall Poppies” chapter in Growing Up Asian in Australia (a VCE text studied in some schools), the recurring ingredients for success among well-to-do Asians appears to include banding together with like-minded individuals, staying true to the self, and above all, striving for your goals – lessons I implore students to extract past the classroom and into the practical world.

On a wider scale, countless bright young Australians who could potentially contribute to the nation’s progress in their respective fields (whether it is science, economics or otherwise) have instead fallen under the scythe of the Tall Poppy mentality. Due to our insidious reflex to criticize failures instead
of recognizing their educational properties, tides of young entrepreneurs and researchers are quickly dismissed and forced to immigrate to America. Over there, Silicon Valley provides five times Australia’s start-up project funding. In just the last 10 years, the ‘brain drain’ has seen twice as many professionals departing Australia! Clearly, it is a malignant mindset that limits progress, prevents people from living to their full potential and shackles Australia from true greatness. Confronting statistics were released in Dr Ken Henry’s Australia in the Asian Century White Paper, revealing that China’s global economic activity has trebled in the last twenty years – challenging us to perform in an increasingly competitive economy. But how can we if Australia has fallen appallingly short of a top 10 global education ranking for any subject?

For too long, we have grown fat and complacent suckling off the minerals of this land, neglecting the nation’s foundational pillars of education. Our nonrenewable resources WILL run out, and we need to seek other means of sustenance. Two decades ago, Barry Jones, Hawke’s former Science Minister, rightly foresaw the need to build a “clever Australia” instead of relying on our ephemeral resources. He proposed the Draft National Technology Strategy, calling for substantial investment in the research sector. I suggest we take it one step further. Let’s model our education system on one of the most widely praised curricula in Asia – Singapore’s.

Upon visiting our sister school last year, I can testify that the antithesis of Tall Poppy Syndrome is present in the schoolyard and the nation’s social fabric. Success is celebrated and not vilified, enabling students to pursue their academic ambitions without fear of attracting hostility from their peers. The reason is that the A-levels in Singapore are not based on rankings, but rather a grading system. The elusive and prestigious A grade is not limited to a handful of highfliers, but rather, exclusively available to anyone who has the ability to get that grade. Even in the workforce, hard work is met with genuine admiration, not resentment from co-workers. The results are self-evident. The tiny, resource-scarce economic powerhouse works like a well-oiled machine, churning out some of the world’s finest architectural wonders like the magnificent Marina Bay Sands. I wonder what our lucky country can achieve with a similar mindset instead of our ubiquitous acquiescence to this twisted concept of ‘equality’.

It is unfortunate that much debate in education circles revolves around lack of funding; what is required is a serious change of attitude towards learning. Remove the competition from our curricula and you remove the conflict with our cultural creeds of anti-elitism. Ultimately, it is our education system that forms the future face of Australia. Thus, it is within our interests to ensure a congenial and interactive learning environment for each individual to reach their potential. I do hope that my students can once again find sanctuary at Redwood Tree College, a united community and haven that transcends the fiercely and sadly detrimental egalitarian ethos that pervades the poppy fields of Australia.