The move currently underway to construct a formalised national curriculum presents us, as educators and as citizens, with both opportunities and challenges. This is perhaps especially the case with English teaching, clearly the most contentious of the four subject areas in the front line of such initiatives and agendas. Why this is so needs to be better understood. What are the opportunities and what are the challenges for English teaching at this time of national curriculum construction? To what extent might there be value in thinking again about fundamental issues of rhetoric and democracy, language and power, in specific relation to English teaching? In this paper I want to open up and explore some of the issues that are involved here, as I see it, with respect to renewing the project of English in Australia. But first it is necessary and important to revisit and recall some of the history, and to clear some conceptual and definitional ground.

To begin with, what do we actually mean when we speak of ‘English’ in the context of a national curriculum in and for Australia? Relatedly, why ‘English’? These are questions that have vexed me for quite a while now, and of course there is little hope of resolving them once and for all. It is possible, nonetheless, to work towards some clarity and some measure of agreement or settlement in this regard. One of the difficulties of developing a national curriculum perspective on English is that account must be taken of the whole spectrum of schooling, from early childhood and pre-school (presumably) through primary school and into the secondary sector. Moreover, it might be necessary to make some kind of distinction in this regard between the junior high school and the senior years. That is something heightened, I suggest, when the movement beyond formal schooling is considered, more particularly with respect to the question of ‘English’ in the university. The relationship between the senior high school and the university is manifestly an issue of interest and concern, and this might be narrowed still further to the interface between Year 12 and the initial year of undergraduate education, mediated of course by the Final Examination system. Distinctions might well be made at each of these points, I believe, and with reference to each of these phases or stages.

We are quite used to taking account of such distinctions when they are most evident or seemingly obvious – for instance, between primary schooling and the high school – although even here, I suggest, there has been little in the way of considered account of the differences as well as relations between the two. Just as problematical however, if not more so, is the distinction that should be made, and rarely is, between ‘English’ in the school and ‘English’ in the university. I want to return to this point in a moment. What seems to be the case is that a hierarchical frame of reference operates more or less tacitly, as simply a matter of (educated) commonsense, and
hence unmarked. One moves through schooling into university ‘naturally’, as it were, growing up to become the mature, achieved subjects of literacy, culture and curriculum. (Or should that be re-phrased to refer to ‘some of us’…?) Hierarchy here maps readily onto maturation, or ‘development’. Should such a perspective be taken on board without question? What gets lost, or glossed over, when that happens? A point to take from this is how much do we know about ‘English’ in these different contexts – importantly, how much does an agency like the National Curriculum Board need to know about such distinctions?

It is important, too, to be clear about the concepts of ‘discipline’ and ‘subject’, in thinking about English and the National Curriculum. I suspect that too often these are simply conflated, which leads to the quite erroneous view that academic disciplines and school subjects simply map onto each other. In this view, it is relatively straightforward that university ‘English’ articulates with school ‘English’, although really it rests and relies on the notion that the former is inclusive of the latter, or that somehow school subjects are (necessarily) derived from academic disciplines. This is indeed a contentious issue: a matter, fundamentally, of knowledge. But more is involved in schooling, it seems to me, than knowledge alone, or in laying the ground for something else – including entry into and preparation for university and the pursuit of disciplinary knowledge. ‘Disciplines’ and ‘subjects’ are quite different concepts, or discursive phenomena.

With regard to English teaching today, it is surely inadequate if not misleading to assume that it relates neatly to the (mono-)discipline of English, or to English Studies as a distinct discipline. That might once have been the case – but it is not the case now, and it hasn’t been for quite some time. Where something like English Studies persists, it is relatively speaking in a minority position, institutionally (certainly in Australia). It is more likely that school English is now informed and structured by a range of fields and disciplines, including cultural studies, media studies, communication studies, linguistics, semiotics, etc, as well as literary studies. Moreover, literary studies itself might well be comprised now of a range of identities and perspectives, including both literary theory and literary criticism. It is useful to bear in mind, too, that our experience and understandings of ‘English’ here in Australia is not necessarily the same as elsewhere in the Anglophone world. In the United States, for instance, university English might well comprise fields such as linguistics and discourse analysis, rhetoric and composition, creative writing, literary and literary criticism, and critical theory and cultural studies – as well as ‘English education’ (McComiskey, 2006).

It is true that secondary English teachers are most commonly trained in similar ways, moving from some sort of ‘English’ degree to a postgraduate diploma of education or something similar. But it is also important to remember, at least since the Newbolt Report (1921), that there have long been concerns about the fact that too many of those drawn into English teaching aren’t qualified, or appropriately ‘trained’. (Of course that might mean a number of things.) What kinds of preparation does, in fact, an English teacher need, today? At a minimum, what should s/he have read (or watched)? What range of reading formations should s/he have practical knowledge of? What protocols of language usage need to be understood? Why should s/he need to know how to adjudicate on the propriety of the hanging preposition – and where might s/he be expected to gain such expertise? And what about primary teachers? How are they to be ‘disciplined’? Which regime should they be subjected to – linguistics, literary studies, reading pedagogy, children’s literature? These are questions that are rarely considered in any explicit way, but they are important considerations nonetheless, I suggest, in engaging in the necessarily comprehensive work of national curriculum development. At the very least, it seems appropriate to raise them here, in this special issue of English in Australia, in the context of what is still essentially a forum for secondary English teachers.

Furthermore, there are lessons to be learnt from history – specifically the history of English in Australia, as a subject-disciplinary formation of little more than a hundred years. Since this is a theme I have addressed elsewhere (e.g. Green, Cormack and Reid, 2000; Green and Reid, 2002), I won’t elaborate on the point here, other than to note that when the public school curriculum was first formalised in the years following Federation in 1901, the focus was firmly on the primary school – the elementary school, as it was labelled then. Subject English was very firmly located in the centre of things, right from the outset – the ‘hub’ or ‘cornerstone’ of the school curriculum, as Peter Board (1932) put it, the organising ‘core’, conceived as at once ‘cultural’ and ‘utilitarian’. Why that was the case has become increasingly a matter for scholarly investigation (Patterson, 2002; Green and Cormack, 2008). Why is it that, in the final instance, English really matters? Because I am
assuming that it isn’t coincidental that English as it was then was motivated by the same, or at least similar, anxieties and preoccupations, hopes and dreams, as it is now, the first decade of a new century. English in the primary school was an established feature of Australian education well before its consolidation in the secondary sector. Something of this history persists, I suggest, even in the present circumstances when – with some notable exceptions – it is much less common now to associate (subject) English with primary schooling, to say nothing of Early Childhood curriculum. How then are we to refer to ‘English’ in a national curriculum context, from Kindergarten to Year 12, and beyond? Is there a common identity across these various realisations? If so, how is this to be determined? Such effective essentialism is surely to be avoided, especially when these matters are more often than not decided ‘politically’. Is there not, rather, something in the order of what the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein called a ‘family resemblance’, observable across these inescapable, even necessary differences?

I think there is. I am not sure that I can formulate it very clearly, or succinctly. But it is important to try to do so, nonetheless, if we are to advance this sort of deliberation and debate much further. To begin with, another key distinction needs to be made, between English as the school subject (and beyond that, a recognised ‘key learning area’) and English as referring to the language – the so-called ‘mother-tongue’. Too often the two are simply conflated, or used interchangeably, with what are (to my mind at least) most unfortunate consequences. I want to begin by focusing on the language – that is, English as the national standard language. What does this mean?

At issue here is the linkage between English and the nation, understood historically. Indeed it is a question of language and nationhood more generally, with reference and relevance therefore well beyond the specific case of Australia. Nations are an invention of modernity, and so too are national languages. The ‘imagined community’ of the nation is predicated on there being readily available two key cultural technologies, namely the ‘novel’ and the ‘newspaper’ (Anderson, 1991, p. 25). In this context I have elsewhere evoked the work of the notable Australian historian Alan Atkinson (2001), picking up on the significance of communications and their various technologies in their quite fundamental link with ‘national feeling’ and Australian democracy. This I have explicitly associated with the role of ‘modernist mass-compulsory schooling’, which I described as ‘a pedagogic machine for (re)producing national sentiments and for making good Australians…’ (Green, 2003, p. 27; see also Green and Cormack, 2008/forthcoming). Crucial here, too, is what has been variously described as ‘print-capitalism’, ‘print languages’, and the ‘print apparatus’ – the interplay of the print-publishing complex with not only the rise and consolidation of the national vernacular but also, importantly, its regulation and standardisation. Out of this comes the phenomenon of national languages, or ‘mother tongues’, as a specific intersection of meaning and power. At issue, fundamentally, is the question of language. This is to be understood, in turn, as a particular realisation of language, as filtered through print and writing, out of which emerges our modern(ist) forms of curriculum and literacy, and indeed of schooling. We have inherited and arguably still inhabit a print-centric world.

Why is this relevant? Subject English is fundamentally addressed to language, or more specifically, to English as the national language. English teaching as a distinctive school-subject concerns itself with the study of language. In this, it has much in common with mother-tongue education across the world. What characterises and distinguishes mother-tongue education, generally speaking, is its focus on language and literature – moreover, the formalised vernacular expression of language and literature, as institutions and forms of practice, and the crucial relationship between them. Whether it be Russian or Spanish language and literature that is studied in schools, or ‘English’ language and literature, depends on the country in question and its national (‘native’) system of schooling. Historically, this might involve particular negotiations of nation and empire, as it does in Australia or New Zealand, or Vietnam for that matter (Anderson, 1991, p. 124).

Australia, like other Anglophone countries, has institutionalised ‘English’ as its national language, consistent with its colonialist, ex-settler history, and the significance of the Anglo-Celtic tradition in Australian culture and society. As I have noted elsewhere, while at one point, in 1947, ‘the British component of the population was over 90 per cent, of which the vast majority was born in Australia’, the situation now is very different (Green, 2003, p. 29). Although English remains the authorised national language, Australia is now very clearly a heteroglossic nation, pluricultural, hosting a diversity of languages and ethnicities, which locates itself emphatically in the Asia-Pacific region. ‘English’ means something quite differently than it did in the
first half of the twentieth century, accordingly. In a new era of World Englishes, how are we to understand and work with ‘English’ as Australia’s official national language? And what does this mean for English teaching?

Turning back, however, to the issue of English teaching as a form of mother-tongue education, which has been the major tradition in Australia to date, it is worth reiterating that it has been organised historically with reference to three key categories: ‘language’, ‘literacy’ and ‘literature’. Each of these categories has been dominant at various times, although they are best understood systemically and relationally, and hence as thoroughly and inextricably implicated in each other. Literacy is, in fact, the more recent of the three to be foregrounded, although it can be argued that it has effectively been language and literature’s shadow right from the outset. Taking another angle on this system of categories and relationships, however, the point needs also to be made that both literacy and literature, as concepts, are, firstly, conditional on language, and hence derived from it, and secondly, realisations of written language, or print/writing. Language, as institution and practice, is therefore primary – and I hasten to add that it has effectively been language and literature’s shadow right from the outset. Taking another angle on this system of categories and relationships, however, the point needs also to be made that both literacy and literature, as concepts, are, firstly, conditional on language, and hence derived from it, and secondly, realisations of written language, or print/writing. Language, as institution and practice, is therefore primary – and I hasten to add that this is to be understood not so much in terms of linguistics per se, as philosophically, or rather, with reference to the philosophy of language. It is in this context, then, that English teaching is perennially caught up in fundamental issues of language and identity, culture and power, and with questions of becoming somebody and becoming a nation, or personhood and nationhood. Language matters, therefore, and so too does English teaching. In this light, it is easier to appreciate why so much attention has been addressed of late, in the public sphere and in parliament, to questions of language, literacy and literature, and of English teaching, at a time when linguistic and cultural diversity is presenting new challenges, locally and globally, and a new semiotic landscape is forming around us. It is timely to remember the Italian marxist philosopher Gramsci’s prescient observation from his prison cell in the 1930s: ‘Every time that the question of language surfaces, in one way or another, it means that a series of other problems are coming to the fore...’ (Gramsci, 1985, p. 183).

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The prospect of a National Curriculum presents, as I have indicated, an opportunity to think again about what constitutes and counts as English teaching, at this challenging moment in history. I suggest that it would be particularly productive at this time to seek to actively rethink English with specific reference to, on the one hand, the concept of rhetoric and, on the other, that of democracy. To some extent, this may seem to be a matter of Back to the Future, and I agree that there is an element of truth in that impression. However, I shall also suggest a more complex framing of how this (hope-fully) is to be understood, something that is at the heart of what I want to call the historical imagination.

It is important, first off, to challenge one way that this is currently being thought about. This is that view which seeks, as I see it, to simply reinstate ‘literature’ at the heart of the English curriculum. Such a position ranges from the sublime to the ridiculous, and draws into an intriguing alliance a motley crew of media commentators, politicians and academics. Something of its characteristic tone can be discerned in a recent Editorial in The Australian, entitled ‘Restoring Literature to its Rightful Place’ (May 20, 2008, p. 13), which continues that newspaper’s now entirely predictable campaign of policing English curriculum change (in the interests of the Nation…), as part of a larger ‘Culture Wars’ agenda. A somewhat more sophisticated version surfaces within English teaching itself, programatically linking English and the Arts as a counter-discourse to everything from literary theory, through cultural studies, to the hegemony of so-called ‘critical literacy’. This is a view that, somewhat ironically and ambivalently, seeks to align ‘English in schools … with the curriculum in universities’ (Slattery, 2008a, p32). The target here is clear, a ‘fear’ on the part of various ‘stakeholders’ (notably English disciplinary experts) that ‘the new national English curriculum framework … is fated to become a branch of communications and cultural studies heavily inflected with critical literacy...’. An English Studies academic is quoted as saying: ‘Like my colleagues, I have specific concerns about the development of English as a school subject – I am anxious that literature, the literary text and historical literary culture remains central to the discipline, and with it the rhetorical, grammatical, aesthetic and ethical training encouraged by detailed and responsive literary analysis’.1 This article is linked with another in the same issue which refers to ‘the subject’s aesthetic and creative essence’, reporting on ‘a University of Sydney conference on English teaching’ (Slattery, 2008b, p. 25).

I have sympathies with this line of thinking (e.g. Green, 2002), but I am very wary of its manifestation...
here, and elsewhere. An earlier gathering, again at the University of Sydney, was described thus: ‘A network of English academics and teachers concerned about the sidelining of literature in school rooms is determined to ensure that the national curriculum being developed embeds an appreciation of literature at the centre of English studies’ (Ferrari, 2008, p. 10). The specific object of anxiety for such events was, of course, the new National Curriculum initiative, within a series of meetings held in 2008 in various places across the country. Since then, the initial framing statement on English has been released by the National Curriculum Board. The immediate response was predictable, with ‘grammar’ mobilised on one side and ‘literature’ on the other, though the general feeling seems to be somewhat bemusedly and grudgingly positive. Yet the view taken on literary education within, or as part of, or as English teaching often seems to me to be curiously reactionary, and even rather wilfully uninformed – what might be called ‘retro English’ ... Indeed, and rather ironically, I can’t help thinking that it effectively takes us back more than 40 years, pre what I understand as the ‘New English’. The neo-Arnoldian resonances of this admittedly complex and contradictory argument are unmistakable, and I am reminded that it is now nearly one hundred and forty years of ‘culture and anarchy’ – or rather, I am recalled to Raymond Williams’s (1980) observations on Arnold’s legacy and its fundamental ambivalence. Writing in the last year of the 1960s, Williams notes that Arnold’s celebrated Culture and Anarchy was produced a hundred years previously, provoked by a looming sense of social ‘crisis’ and political change. He suggests that the times then, at the end of the 60s, were comparable in many ways with that earlier period. ‘As we think and act through very comparable events, a hundred years later’, he writes, ‘it is of some real help to know how the ‘culture and anarchy’ argument started’ (Williams, 1980, p. 8). The point is simply this: the object of concern, then as now, was democracy itself, as a double-edged sword. How aware are we, even now, of the ambivalent legacy of the literary heritage? And do we, perhaps unwittingly, too often seek to carry it with us, essentially unreconstructed, into a very different future?

That an important reference-point for national curriculum reconstruction is indeed democracy is argued by Alan Reid (2005), in his account of Australian efforts in recent decades to move towards a settlement in this regard. As he writes, ‘[a]t a time of significant change in the nation-state, the curriculum represents itself as the major means by which the citizenry, collectively and individually, can develop the capabilities to play a part in the democratic project of nation-(re)building’ (Reid, 2005, p. 35). Moreover, such work towards a national curriculum is not simply ‘an education matter, but also a democratic matter’ (Reid, 2005, p. 36) – an issue fundamentally, that is, of democracy, or more precisely, of democratic practice. What would it mean to think of English teaching in these terms? What happens when democracy is foregrounded in the project of rethinking English teaching, and in seeking to formulate a robust view of English in the National Curriculum?

Crucially this takes us back to the question of language. If one accepts that while the relationship between literacy and literature is, as it were, ‘foundational’ for English teaching, and yet all of this is conditional on language, then we are drawn back to issues of power and meaning, culture and history – ‘force’ as well as ‘signification’. It is helpful, I think, to spell out that this view of the central role of language in English teaching must always be understood in terms of language-in-use, or ‘discourse’. And this is not so much or simply on the level of the individual, as language user, in all the forms of expression and realisation of that usage, but rather something achieved more collectively and socially. This means, in turn, not just that our attention must necessarily be addressed to language and politics, broadly and flexibly conceived, but also that rhetoric needs to become an urgent consideration, in seeking to re-imagine and rethink English teaching.

It is over thirty years ago now since Eagleton (1983) challenged the larger field of English studies with his view that ‘rhetoric’ needed to be returned to scene, albeit somewhat reconceptualised. He described this as the theoretical and practical study of ‘the kinds of effects which discourse produce, and how they produce them’ – that is, ‘the way discourses are constructed’ in order to achieve certain effects’ (Eagleton, 1983, p. 205). As is now well known, he was referring to discursive practices or ‘texts’ of all kinds, he was concerned with ‘grasping such practices as forms of power and performance’ (and also, I would add, pleasure), and he was as interested in production as reception, with ‘writing’ as well as ‘reading’. Closer to home, the Australian literary theorist and cultural studies scholar John Frow, has in two inaugural professorial lectures invoked rhetoric as a key resource for rethinking literary studies. Writing in 1990, and referring to ‘the discipline of English in Australia’ as ‘little more than a century old’, as ‘formed in a context
of political and cultural colonialism’, and subsequently largely conservative in nature, he suggests that now the ‘discipline’ had become ‘more like that of a generalized rhetoric, or a general field of textual studies (where ‘textual’ must be taken to include the conditions of existence and circulation of textuality’) (Frow, 1990, p. 361). This is close to what another literary scholar described in terms of ‘textual power’ (Scholes, 1985) – still a potentially influential contribution to rethinking the field. Frow subsequently, at the University of Edinburgh, provides another now more globalised history of English as a university discipline, and then observes that ‘[t]his history of the invention of a modern discipline is in part the history of the narrowing down of the scope of rhetoric’ (Frow, 2001, p. 10). Moreover, he explicitly links rhetoric with ‘contemporary cultural studies’ (Frow, 2001, p. 5), while proposing that it would be timely and appropriate to seek a *rapprochement* between ‘literary studies’ and ‘cultural studies’, drawing on a reworking of the rhetorical tradition. Along with others, I have elsewhere pointed to Kenneth Burke’s much earlier work as an important resource in this regard (Green, 1988), and with English curriculum scholars such as Richard Andrews (1992) have suggested that a ‘revived’ rhetoric has the potential to reconfigure our sense of what subject English is about and what it is for – ‘doing things with texts’, about the impact that texts have in and on the world (Green, 2006). I want to take this opportunity then to push the case along, specifically with the national curriculum work in mind.

My aim here is to bring these comments on rhetoric and democracy together. It has already been noted that English in America is rather different from what it is and has been in Australia. I don’t want this point to be taken as a more or less regional parochialism, let alone as a New Age ‘cultural cringe’ marker of the New World Order. That is, it’s not intended as any sort of genuflection, either. Yet it’s useful to look again at what we see ourselves engaged in, in practising and researching English teaching, partly though the lens of North American versions and visions of the field and the profession. This is particularly apposite in arguing for a (re)turn to rhetoric. Working out of their quite different political and cultural conditions, our colleagues in the USA and perhaps to a lesser extent in Canada have been drawing on notions of rhetoric for some time now, and there has even been a whole scholarly and curriculum movement addressed specifically to the so-called ‘New Rhetoric’, roughly from the late 1970s and early 1980s on. Yet a split exists and persists too, institutionally and conceptually, between the realms of ‘literary studies’ and what is called ‘rhetoric and composition’, perhaps especially in their respective impacts and influences on English teaching in the schools, which I want simply to note here. My concern is more with the resource that a reworked rhetoric provides, in understanding and renewing English teaching.

In an overview of twentieth-century rhetorics and rhetoricians, Moran and Ballif (2000) trace a history that moves from what they call ‘current-traditional rhetoric’, through ‘expressive rhetoric’ and ‘cognitive rhetoric’, to ‘social-epistemic rhetoric’, with a focus finally on the emergence of ‘poststructuralist and postmodern rhetorics’. Well known to English teaching in Australia, figures such as James Moffett and James Britton are located within what is called ‘expressive rhetoric’, and critical pedagogy is associated with the ‘socio-epistemic’ tradition. ‘Current-traditional rhetoric’ dominated the twentieth century, ‘up through the 1960s when other rhetorics, notably expressive and neoclassic systems, challenged its supremacy’ (Moran and Ballif, 2000, p. xviii). It is no coincidence that this shift in emphasis, and the attendant opening up of the field, parallels the emergence of the so-called ‘New English’, with Dartmouth occurring in 1966. Freedman and Pringle’s edited volume in 1980, entitled ‘Reinventing the Rhetorical Tradition’, is clear evidence of this latter dialogue, though there seems to be little evidence of a long-term and substantive effect on mainstream English teaching (Freedman and Pringle, 1980) – perhaps because of its apparent focus more specifically on writing pedagogy.

James Berlin is an important figure in this regard. In a 1988 paper, he traces a history of ‘three rhetorics that have emerged as most conspicuous in classroom practices today’, namely ‘the rhetorics of cognitive psychology, of expressionism, and of a category I will call socio-epistemic’ (Berlin, 1988, pp. 477–478). This last he sees as providing the strongest warrant for a socially-critical form of English studies. He explicitly links rhetoric with ideology, which he regards as at once discursive and dialogic, and describes rhetoric as ‘always already ideological’ (Berlin, 1988, p. 477) – all rhetoric, and all versions of rhetoric – and hence necessarily political. Subsequently he extends this account to the task of ‘refiguring college English studies’ (Berlin, 2003). One reason why ‘the view from rhetoric’ might be productive, he suggests, is the widespread influence of the ‘linguistic turn’ across the human sciences, which can
be seen as ‘an effort to recover the tools of rhetoric in discussing the material effects of language in the conduct of human affairs’ (Berlin, 2003, p. xvi). Linked to this is what Kress (1995) has described as a changing semiotic landscape, a new world of ‘surplus’ signification. Berlin traces the North American history of English studies, noting that while ‘rhetoric’ and ‘poetic’ have long been closely associated in Western history, more recently the latter has clearly been in the ascendancy, with ‘rhetoric’ assigned to ‘a minor subcategory’, which he describes as ‘almost exclusively a post-Romantic division’ (Berlin, 2003, p. 3). With the emergence and consolidation of a particular construction of ‘literature’, and the growth moreover of ‘national literatures’, there were important political concomitants and consequences, which he discusses via arguments drawn from Williams, Bourdieu and Scholes. He goes on to consider the implications and challenges of ‘postmodernism’ for English Studies, arguing for new engagements with cultural studies and critical pedagogy. He later describes ‘social-epistemic rhetoric’ as ‘the study and critique of signifying practices in their relation to subject formation within the framework of economic, social, and political condition’ (Berlin, 2003, p. 83) – a thoroughly situated rhetoric, in short – and in this context explores ‘the revised role of the aesthetic in a refugured English studies’ (Berlin, 2003, p. 95). He then explicitly links this form of rhetoric with ‘critical literacy’ and ‘postmodern democracy’ (Berlin, 2003, p. 5, 7). As he writes: ‘English studies has a special role to play in the democratic educational mission’ (Berlin, 2003, p. 57).

I have spent some time reviewing Berlin’s work for two reasons. One is that it has been little used in Anglo-Australian curriculum debates and he is, I think, little known – as, indeed, is the rich scholarly and pedagogic tradition he works within and out of. The other is because I want to use it here as a platform for bringing together rhetoric, democracy and English teaching. Various commentators point to the risks associated with mobilising ‘rhetoric’ in contexts such as this. It ‘is not a term to embrace lightly’, Andrews (1992, p. 2) writes, ‘too pockmarked’ as it is ‘by a century in which it has been deemed to be associated merely with sophistication (in the less positive sense of that word), cant and emptiness’. As Lanham (2006, p. 19) puts it, ‘rhetoric’ has not always been a dirty word, the opposite of sincerity, truth, and good intentions. For most of its life it meant the training in expression, spoken and written, that you need to play a useful role in human society. Tellingly, noting ‘the definitional ambiguities of the term rhetoric itself’, Jasinski (2001, p. xiii) suggests that ‘the concept of rhetoric, or what it might possibly mean, is entangled with [a] persistent ambivalence toward language’, which he links moreover with ‘the Platonic tradition’s negative or pejorative sense of rhetoric’. All this suggests that it is a concept and a category deeply inscribed in the politics of the Enlightenment, of modernity, and indeed of what Derrida called logocentrism – the culture of Western thought itself. Yet that is the territory, I suggest, and one reason for why the question of language – and within that, English teaching – is so seemingly fraught. More is at stake than simply a particular style of pedagogy, or what to read in English class.

What then is rhetoric, and how does it relate to democracy? It seems to me that if we do hold onto the three linked concepts of ‘language’, ‘literacy’ and ‘literature’ as they have figured in the relatively brief curriculum history of English teaching, however reworked, we want to know how a rhetorical perspective – or perhaps better, a rhetorical attitude – enriches and reinvigorates them. What is it that rhetoric, appropriately reconceptualised and even postmodernised, has to offer a renewed English curriculum? To begin, it provides (for) a certain worldliness. English teaching concerns itself with textual work in and on the world. We use texts to do things in the world, in the various arenas of social life, to have effects, whether that be on other people or on how things are arranged, or conduct themselves. Our language-ing has both a ‘textual’ and an ‘illocutionary’ dimension, within what Frow (2001, p. 12) describes as ‘the socially formative and performative nature of all textuality’; it has ‘rhetorical force’, and it needs to be taught and learnt as such. Textual practice generally is a proper and appropriate object for rhetoric, although there needs to be some constraint in this regard with regard to English teaching: what is that English teaching does and is for, in the context of the school curriculum, that is clearly within its province and moreover isn’t dealt with elsewhere? This is where issues of selection and value come together, as they must.

A critical issue here is the notion of what I shall call ‘artwork’. By this I am referring to what might still be called literature, although I insist that this should always be done under erasure, as it were, so as not to simply re-install a now thoroughly problematised social-ideological category. It is not good enough simply to argue for a return to literature, as the central
organising category for English teaching. But all the
same a case can and must be made for ‘writing’ which
is ‘imaginative’, ‘creative’, ‘playful’, ‘aesthetic’, and
which participates in metaphorical forms of expression
and worldmaking. It also involves working reflexively
with the medium, and attending to effects of various
kinds, including effects of pleasure. This calls for, as I
have argued elsewhere, a distinct and quite specific
form of literacy – a ‘literary literacy’ (Green, 2002). It is
important that these notions of ‘artwork’ and ‘literary
literacy’ be grounded, historically and otherwise, in
language and in broader forms of human semiosis, and
take account of media shifts of various kinds, at various
levels. As well as the material legacy that history has
provided us with, in this regard, there need to be oppor-
tunities for new forms of production, new ‘work’, even
‘mistakes’. Where else in the school is this to be consid-
ered, practised, ‘studied’? Where else are new possibili-
ties for human being and becoming to be so richly
imagined? None of this takes away or even alleviates the
enormous challenge of adjudicating on canons or
curricula – but the obligation and the opportunity
remains to do so in principled, reflexive, informed
ways.

Again drawing strategically on North American
perspectives and arguments, there seems to be a good
case for saying that a reconceptualised, integrated
‘English’ should be addressed to ‘the analysis, critique
and production of discourse in social context’
(McComiskey, 2006, p. 43). McComiskey is concerned
here with the larger field of English Studies, within
which (school) English teaching is organically located.
In the same volume, Yagelski explicitly focuses on what
he calls English education, and extends McComiskey’s
formulation above to argue that this ‘must be pursued
in the service of some larger social vision’ (Yagelski,
2006, p. 277). Citing Kress (2000), he asks who is the
social subject that we are designing the curriculum for?
What is ‘the larger Utopian project of defining, examin-
ing and fostering that ‘future social subject’ who can
contribute to the building of just and sustainable
communities’ (Yagelski, 2006, p. 278)? These are practi-
cal, political questions. They raise issues of not only the
kind of society we are concerned to promote, now and
for the future, but also the kind of people we want our
students and our children to become. Reid (2005)
suggests, as we have seen, that this entails the exercise of
a rich democracy, now. My supplementary argument is
that English teaching has a significant role to play in
realising such a social vision. Moreover, a rhetorical
perspective is likely to be a critical resource in this
regard, bearing in mind that nation-(re)building is at
least in part a matter of textually-mediated imagination
and community – all the more so at a time when the
world is becoming virtualised, hyper-real, semiotic,
representational, even as its rivers dry up and the heat is
on... In such a world, rhetorical awareness and its
attendant skills and capacities matter, greatly, and
perhaps more than ever.

I have suggested here that putting rhetoric and democ-
acy together in seeking to re-imagine and rethink
English teaching for a new phase in Australian curricu-
lim history is likely to be beneficial. This means bring-
ting together textual practice, pedagogy, and political
subjectivity with the challenging task of (re)forming the
nation, for an uncertain future and in what are now
quite different global conditions. Derrida speaks of
democracy as a ‘promise’, and of the democracy that is
to ‘come’. And yet, as he says: ‘We don’t have to wait for
future democracy to happen, to appear, we have to do
right here and now what has to be done for it’
(Bennington, 1997). How might our work as English
teachers and that of our students – our work together –
and also our work as curriculum developers, be organ-
ized along these lines, as authentic gestures towards a
truly democratic Australia? This means, above all,
seeing rhetoric as necessarily linked both to ethics and
to politics, as well as praxis, as practical dimensions of
being open to difference and complexity, and to the
aporias of social existence. Curriculum is how we
manage our being-in-the-world, and dream of the
future, and English teaching is about textuality and
imagination, pedagogy and desire. The new English
National Curriculum should be understood, accord-
ingly, as constituting a promise as much as it is a design
for what should and might well be, in classrooms and
in Australia more generally.

Of course it may well be felt, by some, that this
whole matter is simply too important to be left to
English teachers, or to English educators and scholars.
That might be fair enough. Yagelski (2006) reminds us
that English teaching is perhaps necessarily, inescapably
constrained, because it is implicated so thoroughly in
the modernist projects of public, mass-compulsory
schooling and representative democracy. Others suggest
that the work of national curriculum development
needs to be understood first and foremost as public
policy, and that it has always been caught up in the
practice of government. 'No ideas here, please – we’re bureaucrats!’ And what happens if we don’t step forward, with our dangerous memories and our yearning theories?

The task is now one of reconstruction, and it is time to take advantage of the opportunity that this particular moment presents of re-imagining and renewing the English project. What might this entail? As always, it requires historical imagination, and an informed, critical perspective that brings together due consideration of past, present and future. That must be understood not simply with regard to English curriculum history, however, but more broadly and comprehensively, embracing and engaging the larger canvas of Australian society and culture, within what is now indisputably a worldwide ('global') frame. What is put in place now endures, and has effects. We must therefore be careful, and brave. The challenge we face, together, is nothing less than that of re-building the nation, at a time of fundamental insecurity. What role does English teaching have to play in this great adventure? What do you think?

Notes
1 I am not suggesting that this particular individual, or indeed any of those cited in articles such as these, is necessarily conservative – the point is that they are enlisted into a discourse which clearly is. For an account of the earlier conference and in particular how it was reported in the media, see Howie (2008).
2 We might now prefer to say ‘designed’.
3 It is no accident that both Eagleton and Frow draw extensively on Marxist thought, aspects of which have always been sensitive to issues of language and culture (e.g. Williams, Volosinov). On Gramsci’s views on education, hegemony and rhetoric, see Fontana (2002). The significance of rhetoric is demonstrated, it seems to me, in the recent media debates on ‘culture’, ‘reading’, ‘history’ and ‘English’.

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