What future for alternative education in the 1980s?

Individuals who are involved in alternative education value highly the right to choose their own school and make their own contribution to the community, rather than seeing these choices made for them, through the State, as a blueprint for the whole of society. Such a position may be seen by the State as threatening, in that as a new and different frame of reference for education is allowed to emerge, so ideas might arise which are seen as based on values different from those pertaining to the State's master design for society. The State's notion of education requires that students receive the education, information and knowledge which will allow them to adapt and fit into the world as it currently is, rather than as it might be in a future-oriented vision. Hence, the child-centred approach of the alternative educators, brings with it the risk, that young people will grow up as independent thinking beings, who seek to shape a new and different future. Ultimately the State sees it as reasonable that individuals should give up their
freedom of choice in education, in the interests of a corporately planned, more democratic future, where educational decisions are pre-determined and educational goals come to reflect the needs of bureaucracies before those of students. Coombs writes of the position as follows:

"We can come to comprehend what is happening to institutions and what they are doing to us. And on the rock of that understanding we can build them anew. Unless we comprehend and act accordingly, we shall increasingly become the creatures of the institutions we have already made —— watching helplessly as the behaviour they impose on us, and the values they have led us to accept, determine the pattern and scope of human life." (Coombs, 1970-12)

Education is central to the social, political and economic life of modern society; it is used to allocate social status and to give authority to experts and officials; it is used as a method of processing people so that they develop the skills necessary for industry, commerce and government. Whenever unplanned and uncontrolled change occurs in education it is thus a threat to the vested interests of the status quo. It is difficult to work out precisely how education performs its functions and therefore it is also difficult to control precisely the processes and outputs of education. Currently education is seen as being in some way responsible for, or contributing to, unwanted processes of social change: changes in the structure of the family; and changes in the values of traditional morality, with its perceived production of socially amenable young people. Thus while education is held accountable for the total development of the child, the process by which this occurs is ill-defined. Governments hold only generalised
control over education and are therefore, unable to co-
ordinate all the parts of the system - whether it be
towards conservative control or towards the more radical
concept of equality for all.

Government attempts to cope with expressions of
disagreement or opposition in education, by encasing the
policy issues in the framework of scientific rationality,
thus removing educational decisions from the realms of
common experience and everyday speech. Educationalists
are faced with issues of administrative rationalizations
which are posed in the form of educational priorities,
which are not adequately related to the ongoing
educational process or the needs of individual teachers
and specific children in real communities. In the 1980s
the signs are of moves towards less government spending
and more government control: in such conditions the
control system will probably seek to rationalise the trend
of the 1970s which devolved authority for the daily
management of the school system on to the parents,
students and teachers who were affected by it.

The 21st century looms as a time of uncertainty
and confusion making it difficult for educationalists to
determine what trends will suit the future. Society is
changing at a rapid rate and Australia is fast becoming a
country of diverse cultures, different life-styles and
pluralistic values - the role of the State in anticipating
and shaping the needs of students, within a centralised
framework, is now much more difficult. Without real and
effective participation in educational decisions by
teachers, parents and students, education will come to
reflect the social needs of the country less and less and