Australia–China Relations in Decline: An alternative viewpoint

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After a period of excellent relations that reached its acme from 2013 to 2015, Australia–China relations began to decline sharply in 2017 and have continued to deteriorate since then, reaching a very low ebb from which it seems difficult to escape. The article chooses several very important incidents that mark and to some extent explain this decline. It probes the role of human rights and explores the impact on the economy and on images of China. It concludes that Australia’s agency in sparking the controversies is much greater than generally supposed, with China more a reactor than an instigator. It also suggests that the present Australian government is quite happy with the wave of Sinophobia, with the mainstream media eager to assist in stirring it up. Contrary to the government’s position that ‘standing up to’ China is in conformity with Australia’s interests, the paper argues the opposite, namely that they can only be hurt by hostility with our largest trading partner.

KEY WORDS: Australia, China, bilateral relations, Sinophobia, human rights, economic relations

Introduction

This article attempts to detail some of the main incidents and factors in the decline of Australia’s relations with China from the middle of 2017. It argues that Australia was more active in incidents destructive of the relationship than generally supposed, while China was more reactor than instigator.

Part of the context was that, at the end of 2017, the Trump Administration designated China as a ‘strategic rival’ rather than a partner, and the Biden Administration has maintained, and even strengthened, this approach. Australia has doubled down on its choice of its traditional ally the United States over China. As a result, Australia has tended to retreat into a paranoid demonisation of China that I believe is unfortunate in the extreme, with Australia having much more to lose than China.

The Renewed ‘Threat Theory’ and Sinophobia Undermine an Excellent Relationship

Australia–China relations were at their best from 2013 to 2015. In April 2013, ALP Prime Minister Julia Gillard made a visit to China that won virtually universal acknowledgement as successful. Among other positives, she agreed with the Chinese leaders to hold regular dialogues at prime ministerial level between Australia and China, unfortunately now discontinued. The election victory of the Coalition, led by Tony Abbott, later that year made no difference to the excellent relations. During a visit to Australia late in 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping gave a well-received speech to the two houses of the Australian Commonwealth Parliament and at the same time Australia and China reached agreement on a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. In June 2015, Australia and China signed the China Australia Free Trade Agreement (CHAJTA).

A new trend towards Sinophobia began in the middle of 2017 and, though not consistently, gathered momentum thereafter. A new acceleration began early in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This phase of Sinophobia was strongly aided from the United States, where Trump was keen to blame China for the virus.

If there was a single event that set off this Sinophobia, it was the screening of a ‘Four Corners’ program on the ABC in June 2017. Entitled Power and Influence and presented by Chris Uhlmann, it alleged improper growing Chinese influence in Australian life and politics. It said that two Chinese billionaires, one an Australian citizen, were donating money to influence Australian policy. Also, at the behest of Chinese authorities, Chinese students were exerting an improper impact on Australia’s politics and restricting academic freedom there.

Though this program was a kind of marker, things were developing in the same direction behind the scenes and at a higher level to demonise China as a threat to Australian security. In the middle of 2017 an official
report on Australia’s relations with China was nearing completion that would lead to a decisive worsening of the relationship based on the accusation that China was interfering in Australia’s political life in a way that made it an existential threat. The journalist John Garnaut, who had worked for the Fairfax media in Beijing, joined the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet in 2016. Turnbull says in his memoirs (2020: 424) that Garnaut ‘took time out to prepare within my department a detailed report on China’s influence operations in Australia’.

Garnaut was already known for his hostility to China and its government, which he regarded as corrupt to the core, and it was obvious what conclusion he would reach. The influence of the Department of Defence in framing the report increased at the expense of the ‘more measured’ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, while security personnel were closely involved. The notoriously anti-China Australian Strategic Policy Institute also contributed. Journalist Andrew Clark, senior writer for the Financial Review, wrote that ‘The principal inputs into work on the China relations report were made by ASIO, the Office of National Assessments – Australia’s premier intelligence assessment agency – and Garnaut’ (Clark 2018). Turnbull’s speeches, such as one in Singapore in June 2018, made clear that the Australian government had come to regard China as a threat to its national security and to the region.

Later in 2017, Turnbull introduced a law combating foreign influence, which went through the Parliament the next year, with ALP support. The resultant Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme came into effect in December 2018. Under the new laws, as one commentator put it, ‘people or companies in Australia who are acting on behalf of foreign principals in the political sphere will have to register and detail their activities on a public website’ (Munro 2018).

The context here makes it perfectly clear that Turnbull and the Australian government were concerned not about foreign influence in general, but about Chinese, in particular. One commentator noted with pride that ‘Australia has led the democratic pushback against quiet intrusions from authoritarian states, especially China’ (Munro 2018), terms like ‘democratic pushback’ indicating clearly that this was part of a global American-led strategy aimed at preventing China’s rise. Of course, China denied exerting underhand influence and resented the fact that it was singled out as more or less the only wrong-doer when the United States and a range of other countries had exerted far more influence on the Australian political system than it could ever do, or want to do.

To this writer it is obvious that China, like every other rising power in history, would wish to expand its economic, political and cultural influence. To see it as an existential threat to Australian democracy, however, is quite another matter. In contrast to the United States, Britain, Japan or several other countries, Chinese investment in the major aspects of the economy has never been such as to threaten independence. Again, in contrast to several other countries China has in the last half-century launched only one war outside its territory, and that one, early in 1979 in Vietnam, lasted only a few weeks and made no attempt to advance to the capital or overthrow the government.

**Turnbull’s Ban of Huawei**

Turnbull made another thrust at China, with devastating effect on bilateral relations, in August 2018, in his last days as Prime Minister. This was to ban the Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei from any role in Australia’s fifth-generation network.

In his memoirs, Turnbull (2020: 434) claims his decision to ban Huawei was not because he had any evidence that it was being used to interfere in Australia’s telecommunications networks, but rather Australia’s approach ‘was a hedge against a future threat’, as if such a rationale would be used against any other country. Again, China was understandably upset. Huawei, according to them, was not being used as a government agency and its leaders were taking care to act in accordance with local laws and practices. Moreover, it was very much in Australia’s economic interests to use the facilities Huawei offered, because it was among the world’s most advanced telecommunications companies, if not the front-runner.

There was another point. Australia was taking the lead in banning Huawei. Turnbull says in his memoirs (2020: 435) that this was the subject of his ‘last phone call with Donald Trump, who was both impressed and a little surprised that we’d taken this position’. Australia was leading the United States in this matter, not the other way around. And let’s remember that, at this time, relations between the United States and China were also deteriorating fast over strategic issues, as well as sudden trade sanctions the United States was imposing on China.

**The Pandemic and Results**

At the end of 2019 a deadly new coronavirus broke out, probably in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China, and quickly spread throughout the world, becoming recognised as a pandemic. At first, the local government was dilatory in acting against it. Authorities were unwilling to believe the virus was so serious that it would be necessary to block travel. The Spring Festival or Chinese Lunar New Year (25 January in 2020) was about to take place, with many millions of Chinese going home to spend the country’s top national festival with relations, and many others travelling either into or out of China.
Once the scale of the coronavirus became clear, China’s central government took quick action to prevent it from spreading, and China has experienced relatively few cases or resultant deaths by world standards. The United States was early the front-runner. However, as early as 20 March 2020, President Donald Trump was specifically associating the disease with China and apportioning blame, by crossing out ‘Corona’ and replacing it with a hand-written ‘Chinese’ in his notes for a meeting (Cillizza 2020). By that time, it was known officially as COVID-19, which is short for coronavirus disease, dating from 2019.

Australia then stepped in with what looked very much like an accusation that paralleled, if not parroted, Donald Trump’s. On 19 April 2020, in an interview on the ABC’s The Insiders program, Foreign Minister Marise Payne called for an independent enquiry into the origins and development of COVID-19 and immediately proposed that, due to its lack of transparency, it was essential to review Australia’s relations with China. She implied that such an enquiry would find China guilty of starting the pandemic, if not deliberately then at least through carelessness.

A few days later Chinese Ambassador to Australia Cheng Jingye made a statement suggesting that Payne’s call was politically motivated. He thought cooperation against the virus was a better road. However, through hostile questioning a journalist goaded him into saying that Chinese people might regard Australia as an unfriendly country and be less willing to send students and tourists to Australia, or buy its wine and beef. (Embassy of the Peoples Republic of China 2020, see full transcript of interview).

The upshot was that China was dubbed a bully, a nasty country that wanted to punish a smaller country just because the smaller one, Australia, wished to find out what had really led to the outbreak of COVID-19. As we can see from the transcript, it is not at all obvious that China was trying to bully Australia. Both sides doubled down on the view that they had been misrepresented or bullied, with a resultant further deterioration in relations.

Victoria and the Belt and Road Initiative

A further action showing the Australian government gratuitously insulting China came on 21 April 2021. The first major act under the new foreign influence laws, Foreign Minister Marise Payne told the Victorian government that its two memoranda of understanding with China over the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), signed in 2019, would be cancelled. The grounds given were that this agreement was not in Australia’s interests, though no rationale was offered for this view. The BRI is a global infrastructure development strategy the Chinese government adopted in 2013. Payne’s order affected also two other contracts the Victorian government had reached, one with the Syrian government, the other with the Iranian.

Several points emerge concerning this development. Firstly, several economists, including James Laurenceson of the University of Technology Sydney, thought the BRI memoranda more or less useless. Laurenceson tweeted ‘Let’s be clear what has been cancelled: a non-legally binding MOU that didn’t commit the VIC state government to do anything, let alone the national government. There was an option to just let it lapse and not approve new agreements. A choice was made to send a message to [China]’ (cited McDonald 2021). National government action against these memoranda was totally unnecessary.

The fact that it came together with dealings with two other unpopular countries and both with Victoria, suggests that it was partly a political ploy aimed against the ALP government of Daniel Andrews, who had arranged the BRI deals. Currently on leave due to a serious accident, he was not in any position to protest, but remained alone among ALP leaders willing to pursue such close ties with China.

Much more important was that the cancellation of the memoranda was a deliberate insult to China. The new and particularly reactionary defence minister, Peter Dutton, said Australia would never be bullied by China. What I think he meant was that Australia would with relish continue to poke China in the eye, no matter what the cost to the bilateral relationship. To me the cancellation of the memorandum is not a move in our national interest, as Payne alleges, but a totally unnecessary and blindly stupid act of self-harm.

The Chinese Embassy charged that the cancellation was provocative and unreasonable. Meanwhile, the social media in China reacted very negatively, with numerous blogs against Australia. They charged Australia with being a deceitful country that broke contracts and a country determined to be an American lackey. Even allowing for government influence on social media, the blogs undoubtedly show real anger among ordinary Chinese (see Kuang et al. 2021).

Human Rights

One of the features of contemporary international relations is the emphasis placed on human rights. In general, western countries see human rights in terms of individual freedoms and put a good deal of weight on the right to dissent. China, on the other hand, stresses the overall livelihood of millions of people, which means that rapid economic growth and rise in standards of living imply a
good human rights record. The United States regards itself as world arbiter of human rights, and always behaves as such. It continually condemns other countries, especially China, for breaches, a fact which China resents greatly. In the last few years China has become more influential in United Nations human rights bodies than used to be the case, and counters criticisms forcefully.

In Australia–China relations, mutual criticism over human rights has greatly worsened the already bad situation discussed so far. Australian representatives, especially Payne, have issued frequent condemnatory statements on human rights, often along with ‘like-minded’ countries, almost always western and especially Anglophone. China has responded with caustic demands that Australia (and others) should mind their own business and not interfere in China’s internal affairs. The ‘wolf warrior’ (i.e. acid-tongued and rude) style of diplomacy adopted by several prominent Chinese spokespeople has only served to sharpen the tensions created by the disagreements over human rights.

For Australia (and the West in general), two issues have recently loomed very large, Hong Kong and Xinjiang. China has countered by condemning Australia with human rights abuses connected with such matters as its performance in Afghanistan, anti-Asian and other forms of racism, and the ill-treatment of inmates of immigration detention centres.

The rights and wrongs of the Hong Kong and Xinjiang issues are very complex and beyond the scope of this article. Australian spokespeople, especially Marise Payne but also including some especially anti-China members of federal parliament such as Senator James Paterson, have been very voluble on both issues. I deal here briefly with Xinjiang, which, more than any other issue, has led to a drastic worsening of images of China, especially in the Anglosphere and western countries.

The basic issue here is the claim of various serious abuses by western scholars, especially the German theologian Adrian Zenz, and think-tanks, including the Australian Security Policy Institute, that a million Uighurs have been detained in what are termed ‘concentration camps’ in Xinjiang. Other abuses include forced sterilisation of women, forced labour amounting to slavery, and taking children away from their parents for education by the state. Chinese accounts say the concentration camps are in fact education facilities designed to teach people skills that enable them to escape poverty and to de-radicalise potential Islamic radical terrorists and separatists.

It is worth noting that for decades the United States has been trying to stir up conflict in Central Asia with the very clear aim of fanning discontent in Xinjiang and causing trouble to China. It has been partly successful in that some young Uighurs have become disaffected with the Chinese government. Young Uighurs have been found fighting abroad for radical Islamist causes, for example in Syria and Afghanistan. There was a major racial riot in July 2009 in the capital Ürümqi that killed nearly two hundred people, most of them Han, and many serious terrorist incidents since then. In my opinion the de-radicalisation camps are an overreaction to eliminating terrorism, but to discount this problem altogether is quite unfair.

On his last day in office, 19 January 2021, the Trump Administration’s Secretary of State Mike Pompeo poured further fuel on the fire by charging that what was happening in Xinjiang was not only serious abuses of human rights, but also genocide against the Uighurs, the most serious of all crimes against humanity. The incoming Biden Administration’s Secretary of State Antony Blinken agreed with this condemnation. The Dutch parliament and the Canadian and British Houses of Commons have all passed resolutions condemning China of genocide. Up to now, Australia has fortunately refused to follow suit. On 15 March, the Australian Senate rejected a motion by China hawk Senator Rex Patterson that condemned China for genocide in Xinjiang.

On the other hand, when at a National Press Club forum in mid-April 2021, ANU China scholar Professor Jane Golley quoted a highly scholarly anonymous paper casting doubt on the western claims of serious human rights abuses and genocide, Senator James Paterson said he found it astonishing that she would defend this article and criticised her severely (Packham 2021). I may add that, though it is unpublished and cannot be quoted, I have seen this anonymous report, not as peer reviewer but because a friend sent me a copy. I agree with Jane Golley that it has much very interesting and, I consider, valid material casting serious doubt on the evidence produced by Adrian Zenz and others.

It is also notable, and highly disturbing, that a government senator should take it on himself to issue a public criticism of an academic, in essence for adopting a different line on foreign policy from his own, even more anti-China than the official government line. To this writer, that smacks of the McCarthyism that was so destructive to public debate in the United States in the 1950s.

Of course, China rejected the accusation of genocide. In this case, I believe the Chinese are right. Mike Pompeo was being deliberately incendiary by bringing this issue into the controversy. There is no evidence of intent to eradicate an ethnic group, which is the main criterion for genocide in the United Nations definition. The Uighur
Chinese people frequently contrast the American and other western reaction to the September 11 incidents of 2001 with the Chinese to the series of terrorist incidents that characterised the end of the twentieth century and early twenty-first. The western reaction was to invade Afghanistan and later Iraq with hundreds of thousands of Muslim deaths and a terrible and virtually insoluble situation in the Middle East. The Chinese reaction was to set up education camps.

China has also counter-attacked against Australia. The most serious case occurred at the end of November 2020, when a political cartoon appeared on social media showing an Australian soldier with a knife apparently killing an Afghan child, and was then officially tweeted by the ‘wolf warrior’ diplomat Zhao Lijian. This prompted a furious and indignant response from Morrison, charging that the posting was repugnant. My own response was that it was indeed repugnant, but Morrison overreacted. The incident occurred in the wake of the Brereton Report, which had exposed very serious human rights abuses by Australian soldiers in Afghanistan. To raise the whole affair to prime minister level was unnecessary and undignified.

On 12 March, China and several other countries issued a statement to the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva charging Australia with human rights abuses on several grounds. These included the immigration detention centres in Papua New Guinea and Nauru, where medical conditions were inadequate: ‘a large number of immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers have been detained over a long period of time or even indefinitely, and their human rights have been violated’.

The statement again raised accusations against Australia over human rights abuses committed against children in Afghanistan and charged Australia with such abuses as increase in racism and violence against women. Actually, neither the Australian press nor the relevant government departments took much notice of what the Chinese had to say on human rights. But on bilateral relations the effect can only be negative.

Economic Relations

Initially, trade was not affected by the furore over Chinese influence. Merchandise trade in 2019-2020 was worth nearly AUD$233 billion, making China by far Australia’s top trading partner, with 33.5 per cent of the total. In addition, this trade figure was the highest on record and 9.1 per cent above the previous financial year. The main Australian exports to China were iron ore, natural gas, coal and beef, while the other way around the top products were telecom equipment, computers, furniture and refined petroleum (DFAT 2021).

From May 2020, China began to ban imports of various products from Australia. They included beef, coal, wine, barley, cotton, lobsters, and wood. Reasons given included health and safety and prevention of dumping, but the real reason was almost certainly political. With the perceived insult concerning the initiative Australia was taking into the origin and spread of coronavirus, China came to think of Australia as an unfriendly country with which it preferred not to trade if it could find alternatives. In conventional terms, China was ‘punishing’ or ‘adopting punitive measures against’ Australia for demanding an independent enquiry into the virus.

The result was that, from the middle of 2020, Australian exports showed a decline on previous years. However, China remains Australia’s largest trading partner. The reason is the very large quantity of iron ore Australia exports to China. Both countries have tried to diversify their trade more. For iron ore, Brazil is a current choice, but is mired in the grip of COVID-19, and there are potential alternatives in Africa. For the time being, individual enterprises are severely affected, but overall trade remains healthy. In the longer term, Australia has much more to lose economically from quarrelling with China than the other way around.

Turning to investment, we find that in 2019 Chinese direct investment in Australia was AUD$2.6 billion, lower than any year since 2007. In 2020, it experienced a drop of 61 per cent to AUD$1 billion. Reasons included changed investment settings due to the pandemic and strained relations with China. In March a new national security test was introduced that allowed the treasurer to cancel deals retrospectively (Karp 2021). This was clearly intended for use against China, with Treasurer Josh Frydenberg and the government in general obsessed with national security regarding China and happy to discriminate against it.

Another aspect relevant to economic relations, as well as to people-to-people and other contacts, is tourism. In 2019, there were 1,432,800 Chinese tourists visiting Australia. This made China the largest of all contributors to Australian tourism, even ahead of New Zealand, with 1,407,200 visitors. Chinese tourists spent AUD$11.9 billion in 2019, far ahead of those from any other country, the next being the United States with AUD$4.0 billion.
However, Australia closed its borders to any traveller from China in February 2020. This was due to the onset of the pandemic, although Chinese considered it discriminatory. The Australian international tourist market is still alive, but COVID-19 has put severe constraints on it and it does not look likely to recover in the near term. This is a heavy blow to Australia's economic and people-to-people relations with China.

**Students**

Another group of Chinese greatly affected by the decision to block entry to Australia to anybody from China is students. While shortly afterwards Australian borders were closed to all overseas students the initial ban resulted in some Chinese students being badly treated by immigration officials. These Chinese students have been extremely valuable to Australia's education system, both in terms of their quality and quantity, and in terms of what they contribute academically and economically. The number of Chinese students in 2019 was about 260 thousand, among them about 165 thousand in the higher education sector. The number had been rising year on year since 2013. China was by far the main contributor to the Australian education system, with more than twice as many as India, the country in second place (Hinton 2020).

The grounds the Australian government gave for denying entry to people from China from February 2020 was COVID-19, China at that time being the epicentre. However, many students, who were returning to continue their courses after a holiday in China over the Spring Festival holiday, were badly treated by immigration officials with some having their visas cancelled while they were actually in the air on their way back to Australia. One claimed that, on arrival in Sydney early in the morning, he 'was interviewed for hours then taken under guard with three other Chinese students to a hotel where they were detained'. University authorities apologised for this disgraceful treatment, but government representatives did not seem to care (Dodd 2020).

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At the beginning of June 2020, the Chinese government issued advice to its citizens not to visit Australia. The reason given was that there had been a rise in racist incidents against Asians in general and Chinese in particular, which had worsened due to the coronavirus pandemic. Several Australian government ministers indignantly rejected the claim (ABC 2020). However, their pleas are unlikely to persuade Chinese authorities.

The prospects for the Chinese students to return to Australia in the post-pandemic era in anything like earlier numbers do not look good. The bad state of bilateral relations does not help. On the other hand, apart from New Zealand, the Anglophone countries are also turning their back on China at present, so the competition may not be too keen. The trouble is that trust is broken and may not be easily restored. Given the circumstances, many Chinese students may prefer to stay at home.

**Australian Images of China**

The impact of the deteriorating relationship, politics in Australia and perceptions of China’s human rights abuses has been a catastrophic worsening in the way Australians regard the larger country. The executive summary of the 2020 Lowy Institute Poll begins as follows: 'Trust in China is at the lowest level ever recorded in the Lowy Institute Poll, with only 23% of Australians saying they trust China somewhat or a lot “to act responsibly in the world”, a 29-point fall since 2018’ (Kassam 2020). Although precise figures for the way Chinese view Australians are unavailable, blog evidence suggests a similar process has taken place in the other direction.

The mainstream media has added to the image decline through solidly and persistently anti-China attitudes. We saw that the first major media salvo attacking China for interference in Australian politics came from the ABC, normally much more left-wing in its reporting than the other mainstream media. The Murdoch and Fairfax press have helped stoke feeling against China.

Professor Wanning Sun of the University of Technology Sydney carried out research on the reaction of the Australian media to China during the COVID-19 pandemic. The essence of her findings is reflected in the following quotation:

The way various segments of the Australian media report on China’s COVID-19 experience reflects these media’s own fears and anxieties and their political, ideological, and cultural positions. More credible media outlets in Australia have mostly framed China’s efforts in political and ideological terms. In comparison, the tabloid media have resorted to conspiratorial, racist, and Sinophobic positions. Through my research, I found that the coverage of China’s experience is a continuation and embodiment of the ‘China threat’ and ‘Chinese influence’ discourses [bold in original] (Sun 2021).

I suspect strongly that this wave of Sinophobia is very welcome to the government, even whipped up by it, with the aim of assisting in stopping China’s rise. The media seems very happy to go along with promoting it.

**Conclusion**

So what does all this amount to? The government thinks Australia is safer, because our alliances with the United
States and other democratic forces are stronger. On the other hand, we are well on the way to making an enemy of China.

The context is of a changing balance of power between China and the United States, especially in the Pacific, shifting in China’s favour. We know that China is rising. The United States is not necessarily declining strategically, but the balance with China certainly does not favour it. It’s not sensible for us to be an enemy of China under those circumstances.

Economically, it is extremely harmful for Australia to have fallen out with China. It is all very well to say, ‘oh, how deceitful they are to punish us!’; but the fact remains that Chinese would rather trade with countries they don’t perceive as insulting them all the time. Unfortunately, the accusation of deceit and arrogance cuts both ways and Australia has more to lose.

Then there is the question of social relations in Australia itself. Many reports indicate a rise in anti-Chinese racism. The murder of six girls of Asian descent in the Atlanta Spa shootings in March 2021 suggests that this is a trend not unique to Australia (Hart 2021). Sinophobia and anti-Asian racism are very dangerous and harmful anywhere, especially in a country proud of its multiculturalism.

My conclusion is that to allow Australia’s relationship to deteriorate as has happened is flatly contrary to our interests. While it is not entirely Australia’s fault, it is not entirely China’s either. It was quite unnecessary for Australia to take the lead so aggressively in demanding an independent enquiry into the origins and spread of the pandemic. And all along Australian agency in developments has been greater than generally supposed, and China more reactive. Results have also been very damaging economically and socially.

What has happened is that mutual trust has been broken. Trust takes a long time to develop and a short time to undermine. China matters to Australia. We lose a great deal if we let our bilateral relationship slide.

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Learning Curve

1. Back
We’re back here again, second wave or spike, whatever you want to call it, school break now will be open-ended, adjusted week by week, our Melbourne friends once more where the end is the beginning. Everyone knows you can’t do syllabus this discontinuous, and so the hard argue for no closure, that kids continue. But why not “attribute” marks, give credit where credit is overdue? Why pretend all’s what it used to be, default setting, squeezing the same blood from the same small stone, as when there was “freedom”? It’s not as if we don’t have words to cover this, like amnesty, or grace, or waiver. They’ve learned something we’ll never master.

2. Break
The uniform sits shouldering dust on hangers, the whole twelve weeks. At first you think it’ll never be worn again; this is his final year, and elsewhere exams are cancelled, schools are attributing marks. A teacher says, You’ll be known as the Covid-19 Cohort. Dubious honour and grace. They’re unlikely to need reminding, lifelong. Everyone heaves with relief when it comes to Easter so as to go on doing the nothing they’ve been doing anyway. The uniform stays the same size while he gets taller; the trouser-leg will show the extra, scarecrow if ever he goes back. You could unpick that stitching, let the hem down to cover a month or two, since you can’t go out for new clothes, and who knows what they’ll do for the No-Year Twelve Ball, the no-gowns and no-tuxedos, the sans-corsage? Even the first kiss unhad at the after-party seems sinister in a world already without high-five.

3. Analytics
The last thing I’d want to be teaching now is arithmetic statistics probability all right when your textbook looks innocuous but not when it’s live. We want to shield the kids – of course, it’s no longer a choice, their eyes are blue-light, small-screen, they know about everything before we’ve decided to censor. It’s as base as this, each day waiting for numbers, hoping the rise is less if dropping entirely’s too much to conjure, death-percentage nothing over nothing, willing that line to descend. How to teach them graphs, the exponential, as if maths were ever neutral, objective? Populate that table: we are the data.

4. Penultimatum
Last day before return. You must spend it in preparation, every item refurbished, like when he was small, and a new year beginning, printing out labels with names, as if for despatch. Now it’s more about how do you pack a socially-distanced lunch? Anything you don’t have to touch directly to eat; things lurch toward what you once avoided, disposable, as they are in a hospital, everything single-use. When he gets back to the house, it will all peel off, drop away, a fractured shell: that backpack, laptop, newly potential fomites, if you think-like-pandemic. How many hands on that keyboard? He says, I’m not going to be paranoid. Last day at home, before you send him out.

TRACY RYAN