



Opening of the 2008 Annual Federal
Conference
President's Address
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It has been 53 days since the defeat of the most reactionary government in the history of this nation. With policies underpinned and driven by the politics of fear and division, that government is now gone.

It was a government that deserved defeat because of its unrelenting attack and desire to destroy the cornerstone of our democracy – public education. It was a government that deserved defeat because of the introduction of the most extreme industrial relations laws ever seen in this country. It was a government that deserved defeat not only because of its lies and deception, but also, in the words of Paul Keating, because of “*the moral crisis that it had plunged the country into*”.

Anything built out of a sense of communitarianism and the sense of a “fair go”, which so defines us as a nation, was under systematic attack.

Given our reach into every community across Australia, members of the AEU have a rightful place on the podium of those who contributed to the defeat of the Howard Government.

Conference, John Howard had much to say about the teaching of Australian history during his term of office. So that history does not repeat itself, let history accurately record the term of the Howard Government.

Let history record the evil nature of the Howard Government that was evident in its policies and lies relating to Asylum Seekers and refugees, the detention of children behind razor wire, the Tampa affair, children overboard, SIEV X and the war in Iraq.

Let history record the racism and xenophobia and the demonisation of Australian citizens of different backgrounds all of which were well highlighted in the final weeks of the election campaign.

In the former liberal held seat of Lindsay, just days before the election, members of the Liberal party were uncovered distributing material aimed at vilifying a section of Australian society and at inciting hatred.

The fact that the partners of the former Member of Parliament, and at that time, aspiring Member of Parliament, together with a member of the State Executive of the Liberal Party, sought to distribute this material themselves further exposes how racist to the core they are.

Conference, the defeat of the Howard Government was the prerequisite if there was to be any hope for change in policy direction in Australia.

Prime Minister Rudd successfully made education a central issue of the election and as educators we welcomed that.

The results of a national poll released by the Australian Education Union today show just how important the issue was in delivering the Australian Labor Party victory in the election.

71% of Australians say education was very important or important in determining their vote versus only 27% for whom it was not important.

Among Labor voters, 80% said education was very important or important in determining how they voted.

61% of Labor voters said that the Howard Government's neglect of public education was an important factor in their vote.

Among the Rudd Liberals, that critical group who voted Coalition in 2004 and Labor in 2007, 60% said the Howard Government's neglect of public education was an important factor in their vote.

Conference, at his campaign launch Kevin Rudd said that "education is the engine room of equity, education is the engine room of opportunity and education is the engine room of the economy."

We wholeheartedly agree with this statement. But the Education Revolution now needs substance through significantly increased investment in public education.

In our recently conducted poll, 82% of Australians agreed or strongly agreed that "there will be no Education Revolution unless the Labor Government invests substantially more in public education".

Even 80% of Coalition voters agreed with that. Among the Rudd Liberals who voted Coalition in 2004 and Labor in 2007 the number was 83% in favour. Only 13 per cent disagreed.

These results confirm that the community expects Labor to move quickly to redress the neglect of public education during the years of the Howard Government.

Targeted funding in key areas would ensure Australia has the highest quality public schools and a world class TAFE system

Kevin Rudd also said that he would govern in the national interest. There would be no greater and more tangible example of governing in the national interest than ensuring that public education is a national priority. There is no more important national asset than our students and public education.

Public education is central to community building, capacity building and nation building. As I've already mentioned, the most pressing priority for the Rudd government is to redress the decade of Coalition neglect in funding. This neglect now sees Australia ranked third last against 26 other OECD nations when it comes to public expenditure on education.

Regrettably, the Rudd government has announced that it will maintain the SES funding model until 2012, a funding model which is distorted, corrupt and discredited. It is distorted as it does not reflect the individual wealth of parents but rather the SES of an entire census area. It is corrupt because around 60% of private schools are receiving more funding than would otherwise be received were this distorted formula properly applied. It is therefore totally discredited.

Conference, as revealed in an article in the Sydney Morning Herald last week on 9 January, a report arising from a DEST review of the SES funding model, a report mind you kept secret

by the Howard government, found that “many private schools are receiving more than their fair share of tax payer’s money”. It “identified entrenched inequity”.

The current SES funding model is indefensible. It is not sustainable. It is not in the national interest.

In light of this further evidence, the Rudd government must abandon its commitment to maintain the discredited SES funding model till 2012!

To do otherwise makes a mockery of the ALP’s own commitment to a “needs based funding” model. A funding model supported by 87% of people polled.

78% of Labor voters agree or strongly agree that the Rudd Government should make investing in public schools their top priority.

Conference, Kevin Rudd has acknowledged that he believes there needs to be a greater level of commonwealth investment in schools and schooling.

In contrast to his predecessor who sought to establish a politically, morally and legally bankrupt proposition that the Commonwealth is not responsible for public schools, Kevin Rudd has acknowledged that *“the Commonwealth has a prime obligation to adequately and properly fund government schools.”*

Well, actions are louder than words. Kevin Rudd must give substance to this proposition by investing the necessary targeted funding for public schools to ensure every Australian student receives the highest possible standard of education.

Kevin Rudd has said that he is *“interested in one core thing, evidence based policy”*.

Well the evidence is in. Whilst the government has changed, the facts have not. The Schools Resource Taskforce established by the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs has calculated that public schools require an additional \$2.9B in recurrent funding to reach the National Schools Resource Standard necessary for the achievement of the National Goals of Schooling. Indeed, \$2.9B grossly underestimates the true level of funding required as the schools resource task force has not yet calculated costs associated with capital or specific costs associated with special education or with assuring quality teaching for all students. This last point of course, is code for attracting and retaining quality teachers in this era of rapid generational change and teacher shortage. A shortage that is so serious that Western Australia could be starting this new school year with 600 vacancies, putting at risk educational continuity and a curriculum guarantee for all students.

Conference, as teachers, as educators, we have been denigrated for too long.

Following in the footsteps of her discredited predecessor, Julie Bishop brought the national blood-sport of teacher bashing to new lows.

Teachers are amongst the most accountable of all professionals, subjected to daily student, parental, public, media and political scrutiny, yet Bishop said that “teachers were one of the few professions not accountable for their performance and it was ‘high time’ they were.... held responsible for their students’ achievements”.

Conference, for too long we have seen the language of our classrooms appropriated by self proclaimed experts and politicians.

It is time that we reclaim our language!

After parents, it is teachers who care most about the educational well being of our students.

The pursuit of individual excellence for all students and striving to achieve the highest possible standards in our classrooms for every student is what defines us, it's what drives us!

Our experience as teachers tells us that public education is the most powerful transformational agent available. We know what public education can do for each individual child and the nation as a whole.

However, we do not work in a vacuum. Our schools must be resourced to achieve equity and excellence in education, ameliorating rather than exacerbating the effect of social background on educational achievement.

In response to the statement that “public schools ensure that every child, no matter what their background, has the opportunity to get a high quality education and that’s important to Australia’s future”, our poll shows 94% of Labor voters agreed it was a very good or good reason to invest more in public education. 96% of Liberal voters agreed and 99% of the Rudd Liberals who voted Coalition in 2004 and Labor in 2007 agreed.

As teachers and educators, we remain ready and committed to fulfilling our responsibility to achieve the highest possible standards in our class rooms.

There is not a teacher in this country who enters a class room on any day with any intention other than to strive towards ensuring the achievement of ever higher educational outcomes for her or his students.

As teachers we will continue to fulfill our responsibility. It is time that governments accept their responsibilities to properly fund our public education system.

A \$2.9 billion literacy and numeracy strategy

Conference, how often do we hear self proclaimed experts and politicians making “profound” statements about the importance of literacy and numeracy and raising standards. In doing so, they attempt to create some artificial crisis in education.

Conference the real crisis is a crisis in education funding.

That said, as teachers and educators we well know that the foundation for success is without a doubt the attainment of the highest possible literacy and numeracy standards for all students.

Parents know it too.

Well, it's time governments put their money where their mouths are.

In order to allow all students to reach their full potential and excel even further, we call on the Federal Labor government to meet the \$2.9 billion national shortfall in funding for public schools through the development and implementation of a comprehensive literacy and numeracy strategy of the highest quality for the nation.

Conference, the success of a literacy and numeracy strategy however is reliant on a number of central underlying planks.

Six key areas that require significant additional targeted funding to ensure a high quality education for all children are:

- *A curriculum guarantee for all students,*
- *The reduction of class sizes,*
- *Competitive, professional teacher salaries so we can recruit and retain the best teachers,*
- *The provision of 21st Century learning environments including modern buildings and equipment,*
- *A national strategy to provide Indigenous students with the same education opportunities as other Australians, and*
- *The provision, for every 4 year old child, of at least 20 hours of quality early childhood education per week.*

1. A curriculum guarantee for all students.

We need an Education Revolution that guarantees all students access to a rigorous, rich and rewarding curriculum aimed at equipping them with all the knowledge and skills required to be successful in the 21st century.

A curriculum guarantee which will provide all students, no matter where they live or what their socio economic background is, with the chance to pursue the widest range of opportunities in life.

Again there is overwhelming public support for the Rudd Government to act. 94% of those polled think that ensuring all public schools are able to offer a rich and rigorous curriculum is important or very important.

2. The reduction of class sizes.

Our polling shows that for parents and the public in general, “investing in our public schools to lower class sizes and deliver more individual attention to students” remains the top priority.

Governments must acknowledge that we have above OECD average class sizes.

Reducing class sizes would allow us to increase individual attention for all students – from our most gifted and talented through to those with special learning needs.

More teachers would ensure that all students get the education they need and deserve through expanded enrichment and extension programs and appropriate early intervention programs.

Conference, I know I digress here, but it is interesting to note that primary education, rural education, special education and Indigenous education were all rightly identified by Kevin Rudd as priorities during the course of the election campaign. Unfortunately, they did not receive any additional funding!

3. Competitive, professional teacher salaries so we can recruit and retain the best teachers.

Whilst we have above OECD average class sizes, we have below OECD average teacher salaries. By OECD standards we also have a higher workload as a result of above average face to face teaching hours.

According to our poll over 97% think “investing more in teachers to ensure we can recruit and retain the best people for schools” is important or very important.

The guarantee of a rigorous, rich and rewarding curriculum for all students can only be made possible with a highly qualified, well paid teaching service.

Governments need to ensure the equitable distribution of teachers to ensure there is a qualified teacher in every classroom across the nation, no matter where it is located.

Julie Bishop’s flawed performance pay would have done nothing to attract and retain teachers in the numbers required.

As mentioned earlier, Western Australia is reported to be starting the new school year with 600 vacancies. South Australia is recruiting in other states.

Julie Bishop’s suggestion that the overwhelming majority of teachers should effectively take a pay cut to allow a few to receive controversial bonuses would have quite clearly exacerbated the problem.

In addition to the need for a competitive, professional salary for all teachers, the AEU will hold the ALP to account to ensure the necessary additional funding required for the implementation of their policy aimed at further rewarding teachers.

Whilst committing to the maintenance and protection of the common incremental scale for all teachers the ALP policy is built around the notion of recognising and further rewarding quality teaching knowledge, skills and practice. It states that it is to be accompanied by “significantly increased funding in public schools”.

The policy proposes a payment of about an additional \$10,000 on top of the top of the scale rate per annum for teachers who are deemed to meet the standards for “highly accomplished” teaching.

Many of you would have read today newspaper reports on teacher shortages and the findings arising from the “Staffing in Australian schools” survey released yesterday. Conducted by the Australian Council for Education Research (ACER), the survey found that beyond teacher salaries, the most important strategies that can be implemented to retain teachers and arrest the exodus are to reduce class sizes, to provide more support staff, to more effectively deal with student management issues, reduce workload and stop the never ending imposition of change on schools.

The report further highlighted that the true extent of the teacher shortage is being hidden by the number of teachers being forced to teach outside of their subject areas. This puts at risk educational continuity, a curriculum guarantee and the quality education of all students.

4. The provision of 21st Century learning environments including modern buildings and equipment.

Governments must urgently redress the continuing under funding of public education infrastructure - its buildings, facilities and equipment. The provision of quality teaching and learning environments befitting a 21st century education in an economically advanced nation like Australia is an absolute necessity.

Australian children deserve a learning environment conducive to effective teaching and learning in the 21st century.

The quality of school buildings and their surroundings can ... be a potent symbol of the regard (or otherwise) in which public education is believed to be held by governments and the community.

In so many instances the fabric of the public schools is simply unworthy of what is being attempted within them and fails to honour our society's obligation to its children. (Vinson, 2002)

5. A national strategy to provide Indigenous students with the same education opportunities as other Australians.

We need a dramatic investment in Indigenous education to put an end to the national disgrace which continues to see our Indigenous students denied basic access to education. Bringing the standard of education available for Indigenous Australians and the educational outcomes attained up to that of the rest of the country should be a priority of the Education Revolution.

The situation in the Northern Territory exposes a particularly urgent need for additional funding.

Ensuring the provision of basic access to education for all Indigenous students with more schools and teachers must be a priority.

AEU research based on census data reveals that approximately 7,500 children are being denied access to education, ranging from pre school to secondary school, in their own

communities. The cost to redress this appalling situation is calculated at approximately \$1.7 billion over 5 years.

6. The provision, for every 4 year old child, of at least 20 hours of quality early childhood education per week.

Research continues to show that by the time children begin the ‘compulsory’ years of schooling many of the factors contributing to future inequality are evident. Disparities in access to early childhood learning are further exacerbating those inequalities.

The commitment by the ALP to fund 15 hours of early childhood education represents a significant step forward.

Further funding is now needed to provide every 3 and 4 year old child in Australia with at least 20 hours of free pre school education. Access for Indigenous students should be a priority.

Conference, Prime Minister Rudd is right when he says Australia needs an Education Revolution.

We are ready to work in cooperation with the Rudd government to assist in the implementation of sound education policy aimed at ensuring that every child has access to a public school of the highest quality in their own community.

With wall to wall Labor State and Territory governments an opportunity now exists to end the blame shifting games that have plagued us for more than a decade. In the spirit of cooperative federalism, the opportunity now exists for all levels of Australian governments to work cooperatively to fulfill their primary obligation to public education.

Beyond schooling, the Education Revolution must also invest in TAFE to ensure further education and a skilled workforce for Australia’s future.

Since 1997, the Howard government cut TAFE funding by 26% in real terms. This resulted in hundreds of thousands of Australians being turned away from further education and training. This included being turned away from key skilled trade areas.

We need a dramatic investment in our TAFE system where the shortfall is calculated at \$470M in 2008 rising to over \$2B over the next 4 years. Our TAFE system offers the most efficient and effective way of educating and training Australians to meet the country’s needs and build our skills base. 94% of people think that “investing more in TAFE to tackle the skills crisis” is very important or important.

Conference, the mission of advocacy for public education has never been more important.

One of the most important things we learnt from the last federal election is the importance of community campaigning and the importance of building alliances.

The nature of our work lends itself to the creation of an obvious strong alliance.

I am convinced that we are at our best when working in partnership with our parent community. A strong core parent and teacher alliance is a formidable force.

Let us all commit to the creation of a parent and teacher public education alliance in every electorate, as appropriate, across the nation. In the national interest, let's make elected representatives truly accountable to the majority of their constituents by judging them on their contribution to sound education policy in support of public education.

Conference, during the Howard years, this nation experienced a serious erosion of the progress made on many social justice issues. Advances made over decades have been undermined. This is of deep concern to this union.

The process of reconciliation with our Indigenous brothers and sisters has been stalled if not derailed. Attempts were made to make multiculturalism a contestable concept. Unilateralism, militarism and the sedition laws are further examples of how this nation was diminished.

It is therefore incumbent upon us, consistent with our proud tradition as a union committed to social justice and social movement unionism, to fulfill our leadership responsibilities. Together with other progressive organisations, we must work to resurrect where necessary and continue to advance a genuine social justice agenda in this nation.

Conference, if Australia can be described as a tolerant and cohesive multicultural society it is the result of 150 years of public education and the common experience shared by the overwhelming majority of Australians.

We need to ask ourselves what kind of society will we be in 10, 20, 30 or 50 years time if we continue down the path of state sponsored segregation and education by class, religion and ethnicity?

Last Friday you may have read in The Australian newspaper that the Rudd government plans to spend \$20 million on high-tech security measures for Jewish, Muslim and other schools at risk of race-based attacks.

Before I go any further can I make it quite clear that we deplore and detest any racially motivated violence.

Apart from the fact that this announcement represents further private school subsidisation and the fact that it represents approximately an additional 200 teachers who could be attending to the educational needs of students in our schools, it further illustrates that free, secular, universally accessible public education remains the key for a vibrant, socially cohesive and prosperous Australia.

Social cohesion, embracing multiculturalism, is brought to life in our inclusive, socially representative public schools where we encourage students regardless of racial, ethnic, religious or class background to reflect the best of themselves and strive for individual excellence for the common good.

Conference I'd like to end with 2 quotes.

The first by acclaimed Canadian philosopher, John Ralston Saul. He notes that “any weakening of universal public education can only be a weakening of the long-standing essential role universal public education plays in making us a civilized democracy” - 2002.

The second and final quote is by Keith Geiger who was in 1991 the president of the NEA, the biggest teacher union in the US with 2.1 million members. (It now has 3.1 million members). Addressing 8000 delegates at their National Conference he said:

“It’s a cause that you and I are defending, the cause of public education – and what it can do for a small child or a large nation. The question is not whether we always win, but whether we always fight. Because as long as we fight, we feel, we grow, we deepen and we serve. You have chosen, and nobly so, to stand and defend the cause. And I could not be prouder to stand with each one of you, shoulder to shoulder, as together we battle for the future of our nation’s children.”