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Public Education : Justice and Equity for All

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2004 is a critical year for Australia and for the world. All the hope for peace, democracy and global co operation to address the world's great social and environmental problems that accompanied the birth of the new century has now been largely replaced by bewilderment as people ask how things could have deteriorated so quickly. Why, when we are faced with catastrophic natural disasters intensified by global warming, by an ever increasing gap between the rich and the poor, by an AIDS pandemic, have we suddenly reverted to an arms race and a reversion to unilateralism when we need global co-operation as never before.

National elections here and in the United States have the potential to change the course of history if enough people take a stand against the fear, insecurity and paranoia that is driving empire building, a massive investment in defence and mean spirited responses to the global refugee crisis and replace it with hope, confidence and a massive injection of funds into education and health. This is the year in which we, in Australia, must re-vision what sort of country we want to live in and vote for it.

We Greens believe that rebuilding the public education system in this country is absolutely central to any optimistic vision for Australia for the 21st Century and we intend to campaign hard with you and with parents and students across the country to make certain that public education funding is a headline issue throughout this year in the lead up to and throughout the federal election campaign. Let me reiterate that when we Greens talk about public education we also mean early childhood and preschool education, TAFE, universities and lifelong learning.

Make no mistake, what the parties do in the Parliament when the State Grants Bill 2004 is introduced will be a clear signal as to whether there is going to be any real change of direction following an election or whether we are in for more window dressing. As you know, thanks to the Liberals with Labor supporting them, this not- so- clever country has an existing States Grants Act in which less than one third of public funding goes to students in public schools. This year that must change.

Without a robust, freely accessible, well funded public education system, we cannot reinstate much of what is great about Australian society but which has been trampled during the Howard years. The Prime Minister talks about traditional values but which ones? I do not recall greed, selfishness, and inequality as being traditional Australian values. We must never underestimate or forget what the Howard government has done to entrench inequality in Australia. He is the classic Prince John: taking away from the poor to give to the well off. Whether it is taxation, education funding or health care provision, the poor have less and the rich are better off.

We cannot be a more socially just and environmentally responsible Australia, an egalitarian, big hearted, informed Australia until we demand and adequately fund,

- i) a free, secular, comprehensive, quality public education system including preschool education for all children;

- ii) the highest levels of access to and standards of vocational education as provided by a dominant, public and rejuvenated TAFE system, funded to meet all the growth in demand for training without casualising or exploiting its teaching service;
- iii) universities and TAFE colleges without fees;
- iv) and a culture of life long learning.

As Tasmanian writer, Richard Flanagan said about public education in 2001 and it is even more true now,

“What we have is not a second rate system. But it is a system that has had the guts kicked out of it. It has been starved of money, robbed of its animating belief, and I am shocked when I visit many inner city primary schools, many suburban high schools, at how these proud institutions make do with buildings, facilities and infrastructure that are, to speak frankly, old, broken, and often dilapidated. That in spite of such poor facilities these are still very fine schools is not the point. I am shocked and ashamed that in a society such as ours we have allowed this running down to occur without protest, without anger, without complaint. We have witnessed the slow robbery by stealth of our birthright, of our capacity to become a more democratic, a more just and a better society. A robbery so slow, so carefully and artfully contrived, and so utterly audacious that we cannot fully comprehend the contours of its vast criminal achievement. We went to sleep in a mansion and have awoken in a barn.”

So it is time to wake up the community to the need to renovate the barn to turn it into a mansion again. The Greens want to make 2004 the year of the Schoolyard Blitz. Allocate the money, design a radically better education funding model, and reward those who have worked so hard to keep the public education system delivering during the years of neglect.

Let me address these in more detail.

Allocate more money. Federal Budget 2004-5

Australia must prioritise education spending. It is not a question of whether or not we have the money, it is a question of how we choose to spend it. At the 2001 election the Greens pledged to reject the proposed corporate tax cuts and put the \$4 billion saved each year into education. It was regarded by some as an unrealistic plan in spite of the corporate excesses in the news every day, yet when defence overspent by \$5 billion that year, it hardly raised an eyebrow. When Australia joined the coalition of the willing to invade Iraq, no expense was spared and now that the reasons for the invasion have been shown to be false as the Greens pointed out at the start, there has been no debate in Australia linking the costs of the Iraq war and the unmet need for child care or TAFE places because of wrong priorities. It seems that the media, the corporate bosses, the Howard government and the Labor opposition have conditioned the public to believe that it is entirely appropriate to spend on defence but not on education. Now we have Son of Star Wars, missile defence shield proposals and a new global arms race with Defence Minister Senator Hill casually announcing Australia's involvement in one of America's global fantasies which will inevitably cost billions supposedly to enhance security when every day millions of Australians and disproportionately our indigenous people, live with the insecurity of illiteracy, unemployment and poverty. The figures released yesterday make the point, demonstrating the tiny number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers in the Australian teaching service and the lack of training of all teachers in aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and history.

Australia remains far from the top of the OECD countries. In 2003 we spent 6% of GDP on education Compare that with the latest figures (2000) which showed that Scandinavian countries spent an average of 6.9% of GDP on education

The Greens totally reject the missile defence shield and other Deputy Sheriff hardware and want to see Australia spending the equivalent of the Scandinavian countries in the next budget. Last year the Greens Senators Kerry Nettle and I were alone in the Parliament in rejecting the Howard government's tax cuts. We argued then for the redirection of the money to health and education. All the other parties voted to support the tax cuts and later, when they saw the polling indicating that people wanted money spent on health and education, said that they had changed their minds. There was a cynical political manoeuvre to avoid the flack from the corporate owned media by supporting tax cuts at the time and then in the case of Labor pitching for the progressive community by saying that it had changed its mind.

In the forthcoming 2004-5 Budget, the Greens will again oppose tax cuts and will again argue for the redirection of the funds to education, health and the environment.

It is absolutely critical that the proposed tax cuts are opposed as the financial need for education funding is greater than ever for it is not only for existing educational provision that we need more funds but also to accommodate new Commonwealth funding to abolish HECs fees, to increase TAFE capacity to meet demand, to expand after school care and to provide new funding for a quality public preschool education for all.

During the Labor Green Accord days in the Tasmanian parliament, I was surrounded by Greens parliamentary colleagues who had all been teachers at the early childhood, school or tertiary level. Di Hollister was an early childhood specialist and a Physical Education teacher and she and Christine Milne, the parliamentary Greens spokesperson for education at the time were constantly reminding me of the need to increase funding to early childhood education because of the long term benefits for child development and improved social and educational outcomes. The Commonwealth must engage the states and take responsibility for developing a vision, funding and planning for public pre school education accessible to all children in Australia. At the moment I note that the AEU estimates that 30,000 children miss out all together and that is totally unacceptable.

In this year's budget, we will see if those parties who say that they want to form government and be responsible in government are prepared to incur the wrath of the corporate sector and the electoral backlash from that part of the community that wants tax cuts in order to fund education or will they pander to that constituency and continue to say to the teachers, unions and those in the community who wants no tax cuts but a redirection of funds that they could not do so because it would cost them votes. If there is one message that needs to be sent to Mark Latham and Labor it is this: do not take the votes of the public education constituency for granted. Being a little bit better than John Howard is not good enough.

The most responsible thing that Liberal and Labor could do to secure Australia's future is to spend on education. This year in the budget the State Grant Act they can provide that spending.

Develop an Equitable Education Funding Model.

Apart from increasing the education cake, the Greens are serious about reversing the trend in the funding of the wealthiest private schools at the expense of public schools. The Greens believe it is a core responsibility of government to fund a free, secular and high quality public education system. We support freedom of choice but we do not support social inequality. The Greens want an education funding model that delivers a comprehensive education system that unites Australian society and provides equality of opportunity for all Australian children from preschool to TAFE and university. The current model does the exact opposite.

Quality education used to be a universal good, now it is a good to transmit privilege. More money is now being spent on private schools than on publicly funded universities. TAFE has been squeezed to such an extent by funding cuts, decisions to freeze funding and the shift to private providers that it is unable to meet the demand in excess of 40,000 places. Where are the plumbers, electricians, carpenters, manufacturing workers, innovators and carers of the future going to come from? Is this what we want in Australia?

Which ever way you look at it the Howard government has not only cut the cake of total funding but it has also given the icing to private schools. But it needs to be remembered that this shift to increasing funding for private schools is not just a coalition policy. The point at which average expenditure per private school student including private expenditure overtook average public school student expenditure was around 1993 at the height of the Hawke/Keating years. Both Liberal and Labor are to blame but under the coalition this shift in funding has accelerated and it matters.

It matters to teachers:

- who are trying to teach in dilapidated buildings without the necessary resources and with large classes;
- who suffer under constant and unreasonable time pressure with heavy teaching loads because there are not enough teachers in their schools
- who are denied adequate opportunities for professional development.

It matters to parents who are worried that the public schools cannot offer the same resources and physical amenity being offered by the private schools down the road. It matters to the community which sees day by day and year by year, the demographic make up of the local public school changing with a concentration of poor and difficult to teach children in dilapidated public schools and the middle to well off children in private schools often in the same suburb. If Australia wants to maintain social cohesion and egalitarianism and avoid the violence and wealth disparity that feeds ethnic and class divisions then the shift of education funding needs to be seen not only as an education funding issue but as a fundamental threat to traditional values and national security.

The new socio-economic status (SES) system phased in since 2001 to replace the Education Resources Index (ERI) as the system for determining the need of non government schools for Commonwealth recurrent funding must be abandoned or radically amended. The Government heralded the change as part of its commitment to freedom of educational choice for parents and it was supposed to better address the issue of the relative need of non government schools for public funds in an equitable way. However the results have been disastrous. Some of the biggest winners under the new system are those non government schools with boarding facilities, many of which are already very wealthy. The former ERI Category 1 schools have received significant funding increases under the SES system. In NSW, Trinity Grammar has had a 250% increase and Kings, a 196% increase since 2000. In Victoria Presbyterian Ladies College has had a 208% increase, in South Australia, St Peters College has had a 190% increase and in WA Bunbury Cathedral Grammar School has enjoyed a 197% increase. Furthermore, approximately one quarter of private schools, which if the new SES formula was strictly interpreted and applied would be regarded as over funded by \$80 million, have not had their funding reduced because of the guarantee that no school will be financially worse off under the new system. It is clear that the funding model needs to be redrawn to encourage equity, to seriously address the issue of need and to stop undermining public education.

The issue cannot be fudged by Labor with its proposal to base all schools funding, both government and non government on clear principles of so called educational and financial need. Kim Beazley said much the same at the last federal election and only committed to freezing the funding of Category 1 Private Schools at Year 2000 levels. There were only 61 in the country. His redistribution was only a 0.03% improvement to public education's share of federal schools funding; you had to go to the second decimal point to find it. We have seen how such a commitment can be distorted. This is what the Howard government would argue it has already done with the introduction of the socio economic status based funding system. Australian citizens need to know exactly what Labor believes is a fair share for public education and how Labor intends to make sure that "needy government and non government schools will get their fair share." Jenny Macklin Press release 2nd Jan 2004. What will Labor do about the Socio Economic System?

I am aware of the AEU's concerns about the SES and the Greens agree that there are a number of key reforms that are essential to protecting and enhancing public education and look forward in the coming months in the lead up to the Parliamentary debate on the States Grants Act to discussing them with you and the community at large. These include:

1. The need to massively increase the overall level of Commonwealth funding for public education. Growing the education cake is vital and it plays into the hands of the coalition and its wedge politics to set the government and non government sectors against each other in a war of robbing Peter to pay Paul if the focus of the debate becomes the distribution of meagre funds rather than the amount of the funds in the first place. Both Labor and Liberal would prefer the debate to be focussed on distribution rather than on expenditure. We must not allow that to happen.
2. However having said that ,The Greens recognise the need for a new funding distribution model that takes into account the base costs of educating children and the additional costs that are incurred in providing social justice programmes. It is clear that the public system carries the major costs for the social justice programmes but does not benefit from proportionate funding.
3. We recognise that the SES system does not provide socio economic equity and needs to be radically amended or abandoned and we will be consulting the community and examining ways in the lead up to the State Grants Bill to address the built in rorts of this CCD based system. We would welcome your input.
4. We support capping funding so that the wealthiest private schools, the former Category 1 schools for example do not receive public funding.
5. We believe that for a fair system and an accountable one, there needs to be a level playing field and so it is necessary to stop the slide to differential funding arrangements for different categories of schools and different systems of education. It is inappropriate to have some schools on funding maintenance, some on SES and still others with a systemic two tiered deeming arrangement. We need to develop and phase in a common system of benchmarks and accountability arrangements that applies to all non government schools equally.
6. On the issue of accountability, there needs to be a set of standards and there needs to be transparency, especially in the public reporting of the income and expenditure of non government schools. There should also be a requirement for recurrent funding to be expended in the period for which it was granted to stop it being accumulated as private school capital. There needs to be agreements on such things as class sizes and entry and expulsion criteria. It is totally unacceptable for the non government school system to feel free to expel students and expect the government system to pick up the expensive pieces.

7. Planned provision should be reintroduced so that any growth in the number of schools is demand driven and does not deleteriously affect existing public schools. It is clear that abandoning planned provision and making establishment grants so easy to access has led to an explosion in the number of private schools competing with other schools to the point where viability of local public education is threatened in some areas.

Australia's politicians need to be reminded that public education has for more than 120 years been the defining institution of our democracy. It has been a matter of pride that every Australian child no matter where they came from or how well off their parents were, could aspire to any position in the country because the public education system made it possible. The Greens will not give up on that.

We must have an expansionary vision, one that captures the imagination and diversity of the whole community, one which befits a nation which has moved beyond the basics of literacy and numeracy and which wants to develop a learning culture, to affirm its democratic traditions and give expression to the diversity and vibrance of its community through its public education system. Putting optimism for everyone back into Australia's future depends on it.