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**Speech to Australian Education Union Federal Conference  
Canberra, 16 January, 2007**

## **A New Deal for Australia's Future**

My message today is a simple one – the Howard government has got to go! Public education cannot afford another three years of this government. The ongoing under funding of Australia's public education system which we have seen over the past decade is eroding the notion of a "fair go" for all Australians.

John Howard's attempts to unpick every skerrick of the Whitlam achievements and to re frame Australian culture into something of his own choosing continued unabated during 2006 and have reached a point which most of us would not have imagined possible ten years ago.

From a position of international respect for its achievements on workers' rights, social welfare, multiculturalism, on refugees, and on human rights generally, Australia has retreated to being a follower, aiming for the lowest common denominator and displaying what can only be described as embarrassing levels of sycophancy in its foreign policy.

Far from taking heed of Roosevelt's admonition about fear, this government has actively set out to use fear to achieve its political ends without regard for the results – the inevitable erosion of our enviable record of social cohesion, inclusion and acceptance.

Who would have anticipated

- the children overboard matter;
- the federal government's fridge magnet campaign encouraging suspicion and reporting;
- refugees and their children being detained for lengthy periods in conditions akin to prison camps;
- a culture within a government department – encouraged and condoned - which has enabled up to 20 Australian citizens to be held in detention for lengthy periods;
- proposals to excise the word "multiculturalism" from Australian government policy documents in an attempt to replace notions of diversity with those of integration and assimilation - this despite the overwhelming success of the policy over the last 30 years;
- the introduction of citizenship tests to ensure that newcomers to this country have apparently embraced "Australian" values;
- the infringement upon fundamental freedoms in the passing of anti-terrorist legislation and also anti-union legislation following the Cole Commission into the Building Industry; such that union members who are questioned under its provisions must not even disclose to their families the subject matter about which they are being interrogated under threat of imprisonment and fines;

In addition, though this was much more predictable, we have seen the circumscribing of the Office of the Status of Women, the Affirmative Action Agency, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and the erosion of provisions in the Race Discrimination Act.

This list provides a quick sketch of the "us" and "them" mentality of John Winston Howard – a man lacking the imagination necessary to empathise with anyone who is not one of "us"; who

equates fairness with sameness and who is steadily diminishing Australian society by discarding what has long characterised our view of ourselves, particularly in the period since Federation.

The dismantling of many of the fundamental tenets of our free society – such as habeus corpus, truth in government, Ministerial responsibility, is of increasing concern to us all. For example, the recent AWB scandal illuminated just how far our political leaders have moved from the notion of Ministerial responsibility, with Alexander Downer seemingly delighted for his department to have been shown as incompetent so long as it wasn't found to have been complicit.

In the same way that Howard took Australia into a war with Iraq, blind to its consequences – which are now obvious to all – he also appears blind to the consequences of the broader path he is pursuing; the path of dismantling our public institutions and infrastructure, the balance between the public and private spheres of our society, the benefits of which we have enjoyed all of our lives. There is no reason to believe that Howard understands the tension between rampant individualism and democracy and the need for this to be held in balance.

At the Cornerstones conference in Sydney last year, John Ralston Saul used the metaphor of a mattress to describe this process – he likened public infrastructure to a very thick mattress upon which all of us could jump up and down, take risks, succeed or fail and know that the thickness of the mattress would afford us all a degree of protection. This includes the free marketeers who seem to forget that one of the reasons they can take risks without their successes and failures being totally disastrous for our society is because of the existence of the very infrastructure they are so keen to remove.

In Australia a significant part of this infrastructure has been an industrial relations framework in which common law has been significantly modified by statutory provisions requiring fairness to be a consideration in tribunal proceedings. The Orwellian - entitled "Workchoices" legislation epitomises Howard's long held wish to "turn Justice Higgins on his head," as he said in 1983, and to remove notions of fairness and equity from the workplace.

Since its implementation in March this year thousands of workers have had their wages cut and their conditions of work eroded.

In fact, all AWA's filed in the first month of the operation of the new laws had at least one protected award condition expressly removed; 1 in 6 AWA's removed all of them.

The provisions most often removed were leave loading, penalty rates and shiftwork loading. 22% of AWA's did not provide for a pay rise during the life of the agreement - agreements which in many instances lasted for five years.

2006 saw shocking examples of worker exploitation as employers moved to access the provisions of the new legislation and equally shocking examples of workers being "investigated" by the Office of Workplace Services for having the temerity to publicly speak out about their treatment as part of the ACTU campaign.

The ACTU campaign continued throughout 2006 and has maintained momentum and effect. The recent Newspoll figures showed only 14% of Australians believe that the legislation will be good for them personally, their children or the economy.

2007 will see the targeted seats strategy intensify in the lead up to the election and will require a concentrated commitment from us all, a responsibility this union is proud to take up.

The AEU again congratulates Sharan Burrow and Greg Combet on their leadership of this campaign.

In education, 2006 saw an intensification of the federal government's attack on public school systems, in a cynical attempt to neutralise education as an potential electoral advantage for the ALP at the next election.

In the process, Julie Bishop has shown herself to be entirely lacking in a vision of her own for Australian education; rather she has zealously adopted the line set by her predecessors, Kemp and Nelson, in attempting to destroy community confidence in public schools.

The government's most recent attempts to divert attention from the critical issue of schools' funding have taken the form of linking the notion of quality to the nature of the curriculum by portraying curriculum development – in the hands of the states – as completely out of control.

Bishop made the outrageous comment last year that “the politics of education has moved on from the issue of student-teacher ratios. The new frontier of educational reform in Australia is about teacher quality and curriculum”.

This comes from a government responsible for a decline in the share of federal government funding to public schools – from 42% of the total schools budget in 1996 to 35% currently and to 32% by 2010. To date that represents almost \$1billion dollars less per year going to public schools than would have been the case if the 96 figures had been maintained. At the same time as private schools get an additional \$1.5billion per year.

We have seen attacks on the teaching of reading, critical literacy, history, geography, civics and citizenship, the list goes on. These are all couched in simplistic terms with the educational goal seemingly being the capacity for children to regurgitate facts. There is no focus on analysis, on judgement or on critical thinking. There is certainly no focus on producing independent learners.

But worst of all, and what infuriates classroom teachers the most, is that there is no honesty in this debate.

In the same way that this government uses fear to divide our community, it has no qualms about seeking political control of the curriculum at the expense of public confidence in schools. It uses tactics designed to silence and intimidate rather than welcoming a range of viewpoints and has scant regard for truth or accuracy or even relevance. Politicians are tested in the media about their knowledge of historical facts and publicly belittled if they make mistakes. The unstated assumption is that this somehow reflects on the allegedly poor quality of Australian education.

“Quality” is represented by old-fashioned standards which exist more in people's minds than in any documented form: the focus has been on spelling and grammar and facts and figures, rather than any attempt to engage in a thoughtful discourse which recognises and acknowledges the complexities currently being faced by teachers in Australian classrooms. It is a focus which is backward-looking rather than futures oriented and ignores the continual striving of our members to ensure that, yes, the facts and figures are known and understood but that they are seen as a means to an end rather than an end in themselves.

Instead of celebrating our successes, this government has now begun to denigrate the tests in which our students have been successful. We are now being told that PISA is itself deficient because it doesn't measure spelling and grammar.

Part of the strategy to undermine public schools has of course been the Nelson reporting requirements, on which federal funding is apparently conditional. Most contentious of these in 2006 was the imposition of an A to E reporting regime which requires all schools to report each student's progress on a scale of A to E, a method of reporting which is also sometimes mystifyingly referred to in the media as “plain language reporting”.

The idiocy of the government's position on this was immediately obvious in the different ways this regulation has been negotiated and interpreted at state and territory level. It is not exaggerating to say that no two states or territories have had a consistent response to this.

Parent and teacher groups in all states have been strong in their criticism; in addition, in three states, AEU Branches and Associated Bodies have found themselves in their respective Industrial Relations Commissions over their refusal to accede to the government's demands and, in one state at least, there is now doubt as to whether in fact federal funding will be conditional on the implementation of this regulation.

The federal government maintained its attack on the values taught in public schools by allocating \$90million for the employment of school chaplains, who must be affiliated to an organised religion but who are not allowed to promote that religion, according to the guidelines. Qualified counsellors are not to be appointed, irrespective of the wishes of school communities; this is yet another example of Howard's "same" equals "fair" philosophy where we know that in reality the major beneficiaries will be the ones who are already best able to afford chaplains and who in fact already have them!

There is no doubt that the Australian public is extremely poorly served by this Minister who has - even by her own standards - overreached herself on more than one occasion this year.

She has accused education department bureaucrats of being Maoists; proposed payment according to student results; threatened on no less than four occasions to withdraw federal government funding from various state governments and bemoaned the lack of good manners either being taught or displayed in public schools.

As well, she oversaw a review of the federal government's SES funding model behind closed doors; though she added a Pythonesque touch to the whole affair by calling for submissions on October 11<sup>th</sup> with a response deadline of September 30<sup>th</sup>.

This was not an error!

Through Senate estimates, we know that this model is delivering \$2billion more to private schools than even its creators intended, due to the government's failure to adhere to its own rules. We also know that any adjustment which is made as a result of the review will see even more money handed to the private sector.

The overall narrowing of the education agenda is also being reflected in our TAFE institutions. For us to accede to this narrowing of the agenda is to sell our students short. This is not the time to retreat into what may have been educationally safe fifty years ago.

2007 will see a continued and strengthened push from the government to neutralise education funding as an issue by arguing for a national curriculum, more testing, greater teacher accountability - and remember this is the year of schools being required to report teacher qualifications and absenteeism, student destination data and a range of other spurious information allegedly designed to hold teachers accountable.

It will be a year in which we will need courage and vision from the ALP. A vision for Australia in these early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century which is inclusive of all; which concerns itself with equity and fairness; which balances individual wellbeing with a sense of community and compassion for others both in Australia and elsewhere.

It will need courage to enunciate this vision; to look beyond the hysterical and mean-spirited headlines of some of our media outlets and proclaim a genuine alternative; one which gives us a reason to hope.

Three years ago in Hobart we were in an identical situation - calling for Labor to find its voice during an election year and with a brand new leader. In an interview with Kerry O'Brien on the day of his election to the leadership, Kevin Rudd promised to lead a party which would provide "an alternative rather than an echo."

Let us hope that he does,

In May last year, the ALP restated the principles of its funding policy.

These are:

- Funding all schools on the basis of real need
- A national approach to schools' funding
- A comprehensive national resource standard for all schools
- The maintenance of overall Commonwealth funding for all schools
- A national priority for public education

The ALP needs to give voice to these principles, much more so than it has to date. There is no doubt that the ALP campaign strategy up until now rests on saying as little as possible about schools funding and focussing on tertiary education and the skills shortage.

The AEU nationwide poll conducted last year made it quite clear that the public is well aware of the school funding policies of this government and of their effect:

- 66% of voters believe that the Coalition has under funded public schools for the last ten years;
- 75% said the federal government should fund preschools to abolish fees and provide places for all children;
- 86% agreed with the concept of a national resource benchmark of at least \$15,000 per student as a first priority of all governments.
- 96% said they wanted any additional education funding to go to public schools.

Despite the attempts of Howard and his cronies in the media, the vast majority of Australians continue to care about public education and are prepared to properly fund it.

The Australian Council of State School Organisations, representing the Parents of children in government schools has formally endorsed our campaign goals and will work with our members to ensure that public schools are properly prioritised.

Public education in Australia is in need of a new deal and the AEU will continue our campaign for this in 2007. There is no doubt that if the Coalition government is returned the attacks on public education will gather momentum; the new funding quadrennium will see further conditions placed on funding – performance pay a la Bishop, AWA's and a federally imposed national curriculum. For those of us committed to quality public education it is more important than ever that this government is defeated.

The theme of the ATSIEC Seminar yesterday was "Our Voices, Our Vision – Our Right to be Heard". While this has a particular resonance for Indigenous Australians who have had their representative voice removed by this government, it is a theme pertinent to all of us. In Howard's attempts to remake Australia as a culture in which sameness means fairness the voices of many interest groups are now ignored. In a decent and humane society the opposite is true. If we, as educators and unionists, want to replace Howard's vision of Australia with the kind of society where fairness, equity and compassion prevail, then this is an election we have to win. It is an election that the AEU and the union movement can and will win.