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My task today is to talk about the challenges facing us as an education union in the light of the overwhelmingly conservative environment in which we find ourselves.

I want to consider these first in the context of an Australian society which has been fundamentally shaped by the trade union movement in a way that few other western economies have and then look at some of the specific attacks on public education being waged by those in our society who, because they think of education as solely a private benefit, see no role for the public sector beyond that of a residual system.

If we think about what is fundamental to Australian's view of themselves, most people would agree that we are a fair-minded bunch; that we have an egalitarian society; that our standard of living is right up there with the best in the world; that we look after our mates; that we are generous – I think it was claimed last week that we are the most generous people in the world!-; that we are democratic; that we support the underdog; and much more.

Whether those views are true, or even partly true, is not the issue for today. The fact is that this is how the majority of us see ourselves. That these values are so prevalent in our society is due in large measure to the influence of trade unionism. The union movement has, since federation, shaped Australian values, aspirations and infrastructure. Through well articulated policies, courage, commitment, and campaigning over more than a century, we have significantly influenced the way our society functions.

We have done this by taking the lead in raising those issues, debating them and winning them.

Now, however, those values – at least our understanding of those values - are at threat from the broad conservative environment in which we find ourselves; an environment which is increasingly unfettered by government regulation or a strong, independent media both in a national and international context. That in Australia, this conservative influence is now supported by a conservative Senate majority, places at real risk our notions of fair play and equity.

The first target of the conservative push after July 1st will of course be this same union movement which has campaigned so hard for fairness in the workplace. John Howard has already flagged that he will deny thousands of Australian workers access to unfair dismissal legislation; restrict the right of unions to workplace access; etc.

Right wing groups such as the HR Nicholls Society are already publicly demanding that the Coalition take maximum advantage of its Senate majority with respect to workplace relations.

In relation to education, we saw the gloves well and truly come off during last year's federal election campaign. The Coalition government left us in no doubt as to what it really thinks about public education, and we are certainly in no doubt that public schools and TAFE institutions will be firmly in its sights over the next few years.

John Howard's comments in acknowledging the Coalition's electoral victory a week or so after the event, were telling. In declining to respond to a reporter's question as to what errors the ALP had made during the election campaign, he couldn't help but add – in the same sentence – that the biggest mistakes made by the ALP were to introduce the “class war” into the campaign by way of its “divisive” schools policy and to be seen as promoting policies which restricted choice – again quoting the schools policy as an example.

Now John Howard knows full well that the ALP schools' funding policy was the one policy which was well received by the electorate. Over two thirds of the electorate supported it and continue to support a needs-based funding policy. That is in no small way due to the campaign run by the AEU and its Branches and Associated bodies in all states and territories of Australia.

It was a campaign characterised by an unprecedented degree of focus and which resulted not only in an ALP policy stronger than any it has produced in recent years, but it also forced the government to deviate from its funding policy in announcing the billion dollars for school maintenance grants. For the first time ever, this government felt the need to allocate funding according to enrolment share.

Howard knows that his government's education funding policy remains the one major area of policy vulnerability for him. The war in Iraq, and the position on refugees were effectively neutralised as campaign issues because of a combination of government action and Opposition inaction.

For Howard to gain ground on the public education issue, he must continue to portray the ALP policy as a weakness; to persuade the voting public that his policy of funding elite, wealthy schools does conform to a notion of equity and fairness: to replace the concept of need with that of entitlement.

The conservative education agenda has been underway for some time; we have resisted its more extreme forms until now by grounding our arguments in what we know to be good practice. Unfortunately, it will gain momentum from here on.

Most fundamental for supporters of public education has been the issue of federal funding.

In Australia the federal government unashamedly funds a private education system in competition with state-run public schools; and funds these schools in a way which sees the largest increases going to the richest schools.

This funding policy will now be extended for another four years.

The stated aim of the Coalition is to encourage parents to send their children to private schools, to residualise the public system. It masks this goal with the mantra of freedom of choice; denies the view that education serves a common good and promotes the perception that education is solely a private good.

The current Minister, with regular monotony, conveys the impression that parents who send their children to public schools somehow care less about them than those who make sacrifices to get a private school education.

This reinforces a user-pays philosophy, beginning at pre-school and extending to tertiary institutions – which for most of us here were free, but now, because of major philosophical and structural changes by the current and previous federal governments, are increasingly, the province of the very rich. We are already seeing changes to the socio-economic background of Australian university students, not to mention a reduction in the numbers of students enrolling in universities.

We have even seen calls for fees to be introduced in high performing government schools, on the basis that it is not fair for the parents of students in high-fee paying private schools if some children at government schools are getting the same results without paying fees!

Public-Private Partnerships (PPP's) or Private Finance Initiatives (PFI's) as they are known in the UK are increasingly being discussed and implemented, mainly at state level. These take various forms but usually involve private companies entering into agreements with government in which they commit to funding certain infrastructure in return for being contracted to deliver the service for periods of 25 or 30 years. In the UK, in education, this can currently include all school services except the actual teaching of children. There are of course no guarantees that that will remain the case - private companies are pressuring government for that to change.

During the election campaign, the government announced the establishment of Australian Technical Colleges to be jointly run by business and community. The Prime Minister stated unequivocally at the time that his intention was to bypass both education departments and unions. While, ostensibly, this is to counter a shortage in trades skills, what it will actually do is to allow private business to control the delivery of parts of the traditional curriculum which has always been the province of state governments on behalf of their communities.

What it also does is to undermine both secondary schools and TAFE institutions in country locations by encouraging students to enrol in these institutions, in direct competition with the existing local government schools; in addition, the intention is for unions to be excluded and a performance pay regime to be introduced.

It is of course no surprise to learn that the funding of these Colleges will replicate the inequities of the federal government's current SES funding model.

The withdrawal by governments worldwide – national, state and local – from what we have come to understand as their traditional areas of responsibility, raises many issues for us. Our experience in Australia has been that governments fund those bits of the infrastructure that hold the society together – the essential services: public transport, power and water provision, health, education, local government, law and order, etc. Indeed, holding the society together was the whole reason for a government presence in the first place.

Many of these services are now thoroughly privatised and are likely to be the subject of free trade agreements in the future.

For our society generally, the challenges posed to accepted notions of citizenship, social cohesion and democracy by this commodification of services are fundamental; for us in public

schools even more so, because public education simultaneously shapes and is shaped by those ideals.

This is the values debate which must be had in education, not the quibbling about political correctness being foisted upon us by the Prime Minister in an attempt to avoid the real issues; or the implication that public schools are somehow inferior because they don't teach "traditional" values.

The question of equity, for example. It is no surprise to anyone here that because of the federal government's funding policies, socially advantaged students are getting better access to resources. An analysis of the most recent PISA data shows that the allocation of school resources in certain countries – Australia being one of them - appears to reinforce, rather than moderate, socio-economic differences. This is precisely the point we have been making about the government's present funding policies. It is, however, the first time it has been noted in a study such as PISA, though Richard Teese and others have been saying it for a long time. It was certainly not picked up by the national media in its analysis of PISA which focussed only on the international league table.

Indeed, the growing orthodoxy about teacher quality amongst politicians and some education bureaucrats cuts right across that finding. The current debate from the conservative side of politics concentrates on the quality of the individual teacher as the main quality factor affecting student outcomes.

While the AEU strongly supports quality teaching and leadership in schools, this needs to be in the context of quality system support, quality initial teacher education programs and the provision of continuous professional learning opportunities.

What a narrow focus on teacher quality allows - as has been the case in the debate so far - is a diminished emphasis on student background, the accumulation of disadvantage in some schools and on the provision of adequate and differential resources, which in turn lessens the focus on system responsibility.

Brendan Nelson said recently that we – presumably parents and the wider community - should not worry about resources because the most dangerous thing facing children in Australia today was incompetent teachers.

How dangerous – as Alfie Kohn put it in April this year in an article in Phi Delta Kappan – that the mantle of school reform has been appropriated by those who oppose the whole idea of public schooling and who, in fact, want nothing more than to privatise public education. He, of course, was referring to the US in his article but the situation is identical here - the Federal Minister, capitalising on the fact of an unprecedented eight state and territory Labor governments, has begun to portray himself as the great saviour of public schools – the guardian of standards - in the face of ALP capitulation to ultra-left teacher unions around the country.

His line on accountability in last year's budget announcement is to imply that there is a crisis in our public schools; that this is not supported by our PISA or TIMSS results simply doesn't register with the Minister.

We are in the middle of a National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy generated by a single letter from a group of academics specialising in phonetics; the outcome of which the Minister has already foreshadowed – more phonics teaching, if you please; he has even said he will tie funding to that if necessary.

We already have literacy vouchers, announced by the government last year whereby parents of students not meeting the literacy benchmark will be given vouchers equal to \$700 in value to be used to employ anyone – no teaching qualifications required – to work with these students. I say “work with” because there does not appear to be an accountability requirement that the children must actually reach the benchmark. In fact the only requirement which I can ascertain is that the money cannot be paid to the classroom teacher!

As recently as last week the federal government announced that its own national literacy benchmark is too low and needs to be lifted. The Acting Minister, Gary Hardgrave, actually said that the setting of the present benchmark was a political decision, implying somehow that an adjustment to it wouldn't be!

It appears that too many students are reaching the benchmark, and we can't have that.

As we know, any upwards adjustment of the benchmark will ensure that the most unfavourable outcomes will be shown to be in public schools, in rural locations and in Indigenous communities. Again, this will be used to reinforce the conservative view that public schools are failing and that responsible and caring parents must choose private schools for the well being of their children.

It will also be used to introduce a failing schools policy, similar to those in the US and UK.

Let's look at the list so far: funding, privatisation, values, teaching and learning. We will need to campaign on all those fronts and others at state and territory levels.

The challenge for us is to frame our position in a way that can successfully counter the culture war that is currently being fought; this includes listening to parents, teachers and teacher educators; it means ensuring our public arguments are well founded in research and support quality education at all levels.

The task is have a fresh look at what we have always done well – that is, develop clear effective policy which considers the needs of all students; strongly contributes to the social debates surrounding us – raise, debate and convince others; develop campaigning strategies that really will involve not only our members but also the community at large.

No one here should underestimate the effect of our public education campaign last year. Our message for John Howard is that the AEU will not go away – public education is our patch. Our ideas, our influence, underpinned by effective community campaigning, will continue to provide a clear alternative to the Howard government agenda.