



# **MODERNISING LABOR: Which Way?**

**A Submission to the Australian Labor  
Party Committee of Review  
from The Australian Education Union**

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## Summary

### 1. New Policies

Education has always been natural ground for ALP support; polls continue to rate the ALP highly on the issue and to make education one of the main issues on which voters discriminate positively between Labor and the Coalition.

However, the promotion of fads like learning accounts and user choice which pander to small government and market philosophies is not modernising Labor but rather risks liquidating its social democratic basis. Where new-right fads are concerned, the ALP will always be outgunned by the Coalition and will lose support from educators and the community.

Universal provision of high quality public education is strongly supported in the community and needs both the AEU and ALP as advocates against those powerful forces which seek private advantage above all else. Education policy is a touchstone for how Labor is to modernise...towards social democracy or as just another neo-liberal democratic party, albeit one with a social conscience.

The ALP continues to pay a heavy price for its parliamentary support for the class-biased SES school funding policy introduced by Minister Kemp and continued under Minister Nelson. The ALP has been widely criticised for supporting the change which replaced previous ALP policy. The argument that it was parliamentary tactics, rather than ALP policy, which dictated the decision was not well received.

While it is understood, rather than accepted, that the ALP will continue to support funding for non-government schools, new policies are needed which give priority to the public systems of education in the pre-school, school and TAFE sectors. This will give the majority of working families their only opportunity for decent learning and working lives through quality public provision. Labor's support for choice in education should not be the Coalition's Hobson's choice where parents see private minority interests being promoted at the expense of the majority public systems.

The AEU stands ready to contribute to such policy development, recognising that there are serious issues to be addressed in the current provision of public education and training. As an independent industrial and professional organisation, it is the role of the AEU to work with all political parties to improve educational provision. Working with Labor as the alternative party of government thus assumes great importance for the AEU.

## **2. A Robust Relationship**

The AEU believes it is in the best interests of the ALP and the AEU to have a robust and accessible relationship, particularly with Ministers and Shadow Ministers responsible for education and training in the Federal, State and Territory spheres. This also applies to the staffers who often have a lot to do with the practicalities of policy and its implementation.

Where the party organisation is concerned, the AEU is more than willing to participate in ALP forums, meetings and conferences to put forward the union's views. Invitations to ALP representatives to address union forums occur often, and will be more readily forthcoming if the parameters of the relationship are better understood.

In some instances in the past, those holding ALP education and training portfolios have viewed the AEU as a threat. This view is often based on anti-unionism which poisons the potential inherent in a healthy relationship between the two organisations.

There are some thousands of members of both the AEU and the ALP who support a constructive relationship between the two. Hostility will only lead members of both organisations to become disillusioned and to drift towards other progressive parties or to the conservatives. This in turn will harm Labor's interests and make positive involvement in political life more difficult for AEU activists.

## **3. Complementary Campaigns and Policies**

There is sometimes a lack of understanding in the ALP and the AEU of the imperatives, dynamics and governing assumptions of a political party on the one hand and an independent industrial and professional union on the other. This can be overcome by creating links which are enduring and create trust but which do not impinge on the independence or distinct role of both organisations.

Both organisations should pay more attention to informing each other of issues of concern and to the joint development of policies which can then be promoted and gain the support of membership and the community. Campaigns such as these cannot be mounted in the space of an election campaign because of the time, resources and planning required.

#### **4. Fictions about Factions**

Many union members despair at the daunting and opaque nature of ALP processes, dominated as they are by the Byzantine machinations of the factional system. One of the characteristics of the contemporary factional system is that it is out of alignment with the differences formerly known as Left and Right. This leaves the factions as machines often dedicated to the personal interests of its members, particularly those of factional leaders. As factions are inevitable, they should at least conform with political philosophies and traditions!

Reform of the internal processes of the ALP is a matter for ALP-affiliated organisations and the party itself. However, until the faction system is controlled by elevating the role of policy development and introducing merit processes into the selection criteria for positions, the party will continue to repel all but the most determined boarders and to alienate members of community organisations.

Professional minders who base campaigns based on the pulse of day to day polls, which take the electoral temperature in key marginal seats, have also served the ALP poorly. While such management is no doubt inseparable from current campaigning, the balance that is needed between the immediate and wider policy and social mix has often been misjudged.

Correcting these trends will require considerable change on the ALP's part to enable policy development and promotion to become a more transparent process which does not have to run the gauntlet of media-grab-based campaigns. While sincere attempts have been made in the past, sometimes years of joint policy work have been disposed of by simplistic poll-driven announcements during an election campaign. This causes cynicism and negativity towards the ALP.

#### **5. New Participatory Forums**

Alongside the branch structure, the ALP could consider holding participatory forums to provide a new mode of engagement in the life of the party. These could encompass both ALP members and representatives authorised by invited organisations. That is how Union-ALP forums have been successfully run over a number of years in which the AEU as a non-affiliated union participates on equal terms. In such forums there is always a temptation to have parliamentary representatives dominating the floor which should be resisted in favour of balanced platforms and workshop participation.

Such forums could be issue based and held around emerging issues so that participants contribute to policy development and their own education at the same time. In this way the ALP itself could become a vehicle for political development which attracts new political activists. In such a structure, the AEU would be obliged to participate to put forward policy positions for public scrutiny and debate.

While such forums may not have a formal place in the decision-making structures, they may well prove more influential in being centres for policy renewal and agitation than branches. This could give a venerable party like the ALP new life around new policies which is in the interests of all those who stand for social democracy rather than privilege in public life.

# MODERNISING LABOR: Which Way?

The Australian Education Union welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the ALP National Committee of Review, a unique opportunity not afforded by other political parties. As a non-affiliated union, the terms of reference which we will focus upon are:

1. **Mechanisms to secure the best input to the party's review and development processes;**
2. **Relationships between the ALP and the trade unions and other significant community and interest groups.**

While the other terms of reference are of interest to us, they are properly the preserve of ALP branches, affiliated unions and members. Several thousand AEU members also belong to the ALP and no doubt will make their voices heard through their party organisations.

## **Who Are We?**

The AEU is composed of teachers and allied educational staff in public pre-schools, schools and TAFE colleges in all states and territories. In some states the Union is known under its state-registered title as the New South Wales Teachers Federation, the Queensland Teachers Union or as both the AEU and the State School Teachers Union in W.A. The union has more than 156,000 members, a number which has risen for the third consecutive year after membership losses in the 1990s, principally in Victoria.

The AEU is affiliated to the ACTU and state and provincial labour councils and pays approximately \$800,000 to union councils each year. The state education unions affiliated separately to the organised trade union movement commencing with the NSWTF in 1949 with SAIT completing the affiliation in the 1970s.

Members of the AEU are commonly seen as "middle class workers" who tend to live in marginal electorates of the major cities and country towns. While the voting pattern of AEU members is not precisely known, it is evident that most vote against Conservative parties, with a strong traditional Labor adherence now being eroded in favour of the Greens, Democrats and Independents, probably in that order. We estimate that AEU members who are also ALP members would number around 3,000.

## **How the Union Works**

Members are part of a mature workforce which means that many will retire in the next decade, presenting the AEU with a considerable challenge to win the membership and support of a whole new generation of educators. The "Organising Model" promoted by the ACTU and based on U.S. experiences has been studied and the structures of the union changed to give union activists more scope and support. However, the services provided by the AEU branches and associated bodies including credit unions, health societies, legal and welfare support are key factors in the adherence which most teachers and allied staff have for their union.

A study of membership trends shows that enterprise bargaining in the education industry has been a factor in boosting unionisation. Where previously arbitration-based processes dominated the processing of industrial claims, now a system promoted as deregulation and designed to split up awards and workplaces has united teaching workforces on a state or territory basis and forced them into often protracted and protected bargaining campaigns including industrial action. This leads to increased membership involvement in decision-making and activity which links to increased unionisation.

AEU rules require at least equal representation of women members on all decision-making bodies. The rules also provide for representation of Aboriginal and Islander members with a separate voting structure. This form of representation also applies to members in workforce sectors including TAFE members, Early Childhood Educators and School/College Principals on the union's governing bodies.

The focus on organising and campaigning which the AEU has adopted has promoted changes such as those outlined above to make the union a more participatory and activist organisation.

## **Labor and AEU Members**

Many AEU members are of a certain age; the "It's Time" generation, or a bit after. While this will change radically in the next ten years, teachers are predominantly of the left having seen the conservatives disgraced during the Vietnam War and then again experienced radical-right conservative governments such as Bjelke-Petersen, Kennett and Court as employers.

The public preschool, school and TAFE sectors of education where AEU members work are the responsibility of state and territory governments, all of which are currently held by the ALP. The AEU's branches and associated bodies campaigned in all those elections to ensure the defeat of the conservatives. The AEU also campaigned strongly in the 2001 election to defeat the Howard Government.

We estimate that the total spent by the union in those campaigns in television, radio, print and household material exceeded \$4 million. While specific endorsement of the ALP was not given, the call to defeat the Howard Government naturally means the election of the only alternative party of government in the ALP. The AEU believes that engagement in the political process is vital to defend and advance the interests of the public education community...the 70% of Australian families who rely upon public schools for their children's education and TAFE colleges for workforce skills. However, the AEU is not a political party and is sometimes required to resist the calls of some of its activists to act like one.

## **Labor and Private Education**

Education has always been a Labor issue...with former leader Beazley's aspiration to be the "Education Prime Minister," and increased expenditure under the Hawke and Whitlam Governments as outstanding moments.

While the ALP has a proud history of supporting education for working class families...such as the establishment of universal free secular public schools and later high schools, Labor was induced to fund private education because of its support for working class Catholic families.

However, the religious basis of this decision was the doctrine that no Catholic should be educated alongside those of other faiths or indeed of no faith. This is the sectarian basis which underpins Labor's support for private school funding. It is a doctrine which should have no place in a modern democracy. The contradictions now being exposed about the experiences of students in religious schools in Australia are a reminder of how out of step they are with what should be education for contemporary citizenship emphasising democratic rights and values.

While there can be no question about the right to religious education, it is a primary role of the state to establish and maintain education systems for a secular democratic society, not to perpetuate doctrines which are out of step with current norms. The state aid initially provided by the ALP on the basis of need has transformed into bipartisan support for ongoing education privatisation which is undermining comprehensive public provision and takes funds from needy Catholic schools as well.

While many in the ALP may be uncomfortable with this view, the fact is that ALP policy was hijacked and used by the wealthy independent schools and then marginal denominations for further claims upon the public purse, inevitably at the expense of public provision.

Parties of the Left, labour, socialist and communist, have always put great store by education as a means whereby social class and discrimination can be addressed, and public education was the means whereby the working class could access this promise. Public education has always been seen as a positive factor in the creation of an inclusive and democratic society where multiculturalism is embraced and tolerance prevails.

In the 1970s and 1980s the Whitlam and Hawke governments did provide large funding increases to public schools. But somewhere along the way the ALP's support for education privatisation crossed the line between social democracy and middle-class welfare at the expense of those most in need. The self-interest of sections of the middle class has since intersected with neo-liberal economics and religious interests to create a powerful lobby group. The excesses of the Kemp-SES formula in providing massive increases to the most wealthy schools have been widely canvassed.

The essential education policy task in modernising Labor is thus to advocate and resource quality public provision before looking at the needs of other providers and their demands for increased government subsidies.

### **Labor and Vocational Education**

In vocational education Labor has a strong record of providing increased funding, particularly in the Hawke and Keating governments. However, it also put public provision through TAFE at risk by encouraging the evolution of a private training market and competitive tendering in deference to alleged failures of the public systems. This laid the system open to the subsequent Coalition Government freeze which has damaged the public provider.

Any shortcomings on the part of public providers are properly laid at the feet of government, including ALP governments. Governments have failed to provide the resources, the management or the development strategies which the system deserves. Teachers and trainers in the vocational public systems have often been treated with even less respect than private employers treat their employees, with casualisation and precarious employment becoming the norm.

### **Overcoming the Legacy of State Aid**

The history of the ALP and State Aid is not sketched in an attempt to turn the clock back but to illuminate the source of the deep scepticism within the AEU to Labor's commitment to private school and training provision. Neither is it to suggest that there are not many challenges for the public systems, of which the AEU is all too painfully aware. However, the AEU is prepared to work constructively with the ALP to fashion new policies to redirect priorities for social equity and better outcomes for all students.

A contrast to this approach is that of the Member for Werriwa, who appears to have assumed the right to comment on education issues as the self-appointed spokesman of an "aspirational class." In this he reveals more about the aspirations of professional politicians than anything else.

It is galling for union members to be lectured by him on the benefits of devolution, school self-government and choice for working class communities when many teachers have served those communities for much of their working lives. Worse, to see such views uncontradicted by the Labor hierarchy creates the presumption that they are seen as somehow innovative and to give them status where they should be rejected as simply anti-Labor.

If any social group could lay claim to being aspirational, it is teachers, many of whom were of the first generation in their families to achieve a university degree and who took up teaching because scholarships were available, jobs were secure and there was the promise of a government-funded superannuated retirement.

## **Labor and Alternative Policies**

Labor administrations have sometimes generously invested in public education but often in recent times have been in a position of administering neo-liberal, small government agendas on behalf of State and Federal treasuries.

The fact that those agendas result in more difficulties for the public sector and through subsidies attract more students into the private sector is then used to further promote private provision as superior. Private providers are portrayed as more innovative and achieving better results, ignoring exclusion through selectivity and the extension of class-based discrimination.

Further, Labor's education policies are a touchstone for the wider failure to elaborate a vision, a direction and a strategy to achieve an equitable and prosperous nation in a peaceful global society. Labor's review should be used to regenerate a social democratic program for the times, rather than to tag along with the market-driven policies of the Coalition.

## **A New Relationship with Politics?**

The strong view of AEU members is that they want their union to act in their interests and to that extent to be entirely independent of political parties. For that reason, the AEU is not attracted to affiliation to the ALP. Any move for affiliation would most likely be rejected by members.

Membership and community polling shows that the union's message is less effective the more identified it becomes to party political interests. Focus group research conducted by the AEU prior to the last two Federal elections shows that the community strongly supports the union's policy for more government funding for public education and recognises that the union's voice is more credible than that of the political parties.

In that respect, the AEU believes its campaigns contribute more to the defeat of Conservative parties and their ideology than the simple contribution of funds to opposition parties, including Labor.

## **A Social Movement Union**

Along with unions in some comparable countries such as Canada, the AEU sees itself as a union promoting the industrial and professional interests of its members but also as part of a social movement dedicated to high quality public education. In turn the union supports other progressive social movements of labour, gender, race and the environment and many others. This concept of a "social movement union" suggests a new relationship between a union and a political party which is not encompassed by any of the current debate about affiliation rules.

To narrow the discussion on the future of the ALP to the rules about affiliation of unions would be a major disservice. In the scheme of things it is a minor issue and one which has all the hallmarks of last-century politics. When tens of thousands rally in support of refugees on Palm Sunday or a million march for reconciliation across the nation's bridges and Labor remains contained within the tactics of poll-driven parliamentary politics and competition for the centre five percent in marginal seats, what is the real significance of union affiliation rules?

The broadening of the participatory basis of modern democracies seen in the evolution of the indigenous peoples', women's and environment movements, to nominate only three, demands more open processes by modern political parties. The notion of affiliation on the basis of the number of members, most of whom have no role in the process of policy or decision making, is formalistic and restrictive. It is a mechanism which contributes to the plague of factionalism in political parties such as the ALP.

The AEU will remain unaffiliated to any party precisely because its interests are best served by having good relations with all parties, particularly those of the left, and all factions within parties so that its interests can be promoted widely rather than being seen as the preserve of any one cause. The union will continue to dialogue with the Greens, Democrats and Independents as well as the ALP as the only opposition party capable of forming government.

It is in the interests of the AEU and the ALP to devise open and dynamic processes of policy consultation and development, to encourage activists of both organisations to have access to their respective discussion and decision-making forums and to encourage the memberships of each to join the other where complementary policies exist.

In so doing the encouragement of social movement activists from a wide range of areas; the women's movement, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, migrant and ethnic minority representatives, peace and environmentalists could be brought back into the forums of the ALP.