

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Yes, let's talk about values!

// Prime Minister John Howard's extraordinary claim in January that public schools are "values neutral" and "too politically correct" got the massive public backlash it deserved.

Private and public sector educators, parents, community figures, and even two state governors were united in their vocal opposition to the Prime Minister's remarks. The debate that followed overwhelmingly supported teachers in government schools.

Plainly, 2004 is a federal election year, and Howard's somewhat contradictory remarks were diversionary tactics designed to draw attention away from the main issue of his government's unfair education funding policies.

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Not coincidentally, he made these claims on the same day as the AEU's public education campaign launch during Federal Conference.

The debate showed that Howard and Nelson are not just pro-private education: they have moved firmly into the anti-government school camp.

There was a recent story in the *Adelaide Advertiser* on why education minister Brendan Nelson swapped public for private education—and, again, the release of this 'news' was strategically timed to coincide with the launch of the AEU's television advertisement. The story was carefully calculated to keep the 'values' smokescreen going, though

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this time with a more subtle and less antagonistic message.

Over the last weeks, the federal government has clearly restated its values: it supports elitism and inequity in education. It has no intention of moving away from the current funding model and policies that exacerbate the differences between rich and poor schools.

But it's an election year, and pragmatism—or, some might say, hypocrisy—is evident in the Prime Minister's recent round of appearances at public schools. Make no mistake: party polling is showing education as a big issue and Howard recognises he has some damage to undo.

This was reinforced by a joint announcement from the Prime Minister and Cardinal George Pell of an additional \$362 million for Catholic schools. This deal sees the Catholic system 'join' the SES funding system under terms which guarantee that those schools which would attract less money on the basis of their SES score will have their funding maintained at their current levels in real terms.

What isn't clear is whether the funds will go directly to the schools with an SES rating below 96 or whether the Catholic sector will continue to receive the money as a block of funding to be distributed at their own discretion. Funds delivered

'en bloc' make a further mockery of the SES system.

The government's injection of additional funds is a cynical attempt to prop up its weak 'needs-based' argument.

Howard's sudden 'realisation' that the Catholic system "contain(s) some of the most under-resourced schools in Australia" does absolutely nothing to change the fact that the funding model ensures that the wealthiest schools will continue to receive the biggest increases.

The injection of new money into the Catholic sector simply increases the funding disparity between the public and private sectors. And yet again it confirms the elitist ideology of this government.

It is clear that the greatest numbers of students from poor backgrounds are enrolled in government schools—no matter what their religious affiliation. This is as true of the Catholic sector as it is of the independent and any other sector.

What we need from this debate on values is for all opposition parties to support increasing and prioritising funding to public schools. And, instead of continuing with the seriously flawed system currently in place, these parties must endorse a new and just funding arrangement that genuinely reflects the values of decency and a fair go. ■

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