

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Gloves off

“ If we think about what is fundamental to Australians’ view of themselves, most people would agree: we are a fair-minded bunch; we have an egalitarian society; our standard of living is right up there with the best in the world; we look after our mates; we are generous; we support the underdog; and much more.

Whether those views are true, or even partly true, is not the issue. The fact is 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 trade union movement has shaped Australian society in a way that few other western economies have experienced.

Through well-articulated policies, courage, commitment and campaigning over more than a century, we have significantly influenced the way our society functions and the values it holds.

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

But make no mistake. Those values—at least our understanding of those values—are under threat from the broad conservative environment that we find ourselves in. This conservative influence, now supported by a conservative Senate majority, places at real risk our notions of fair play and equity.

The union movement will be the first target of the conservative push after 1 July—this is the same union movement that campaigned so hard for fairness in the workplace. John Howard has already flagged that he wants a complete overhaul of the Industrial Relations Commission. He plans to deny thousands of Australian workers access to unfair-dismissal legislation and to restrict the right of unions to workplace access.

Right-wing groups are already publicly demanding that the Coalition Government take maximum advantage of its Senate majority to push through extensive changes to workplace relations law.

During the federal election campaign last year, the Coalition Government left us in no doubt as to what it

really thinks about public education. It views education as solely a private benefit, with no role for the public sector beyond that of a residual system. Public schools and TAFE institutions will be firmly in this government’s sights over the next four years.

But Howard knows that his Government’s education funding policy is a vulnerable area. He knows that the ALP’s education policy was very well received by the electorate—with over two-thirds supporting it and continuing to support a needs-based funding policy.

This was in no small way due to the public education campaign run by the AEU and its members around Australia.

This campaign 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

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its funding policy in announcing a billion dollars for school maintenance grants. For the first time ever, this government felt the need to allocate funding according to enrolment share.

For Howard to gain ground on the public education issue, he must continue to portray the ALP policy as a weakness and to persuade the voting public that his policy of funding elite, wealthy schools conforms to a notion of equity and fairness.

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. ””

Pat Byrne is the AEU Federal President.



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