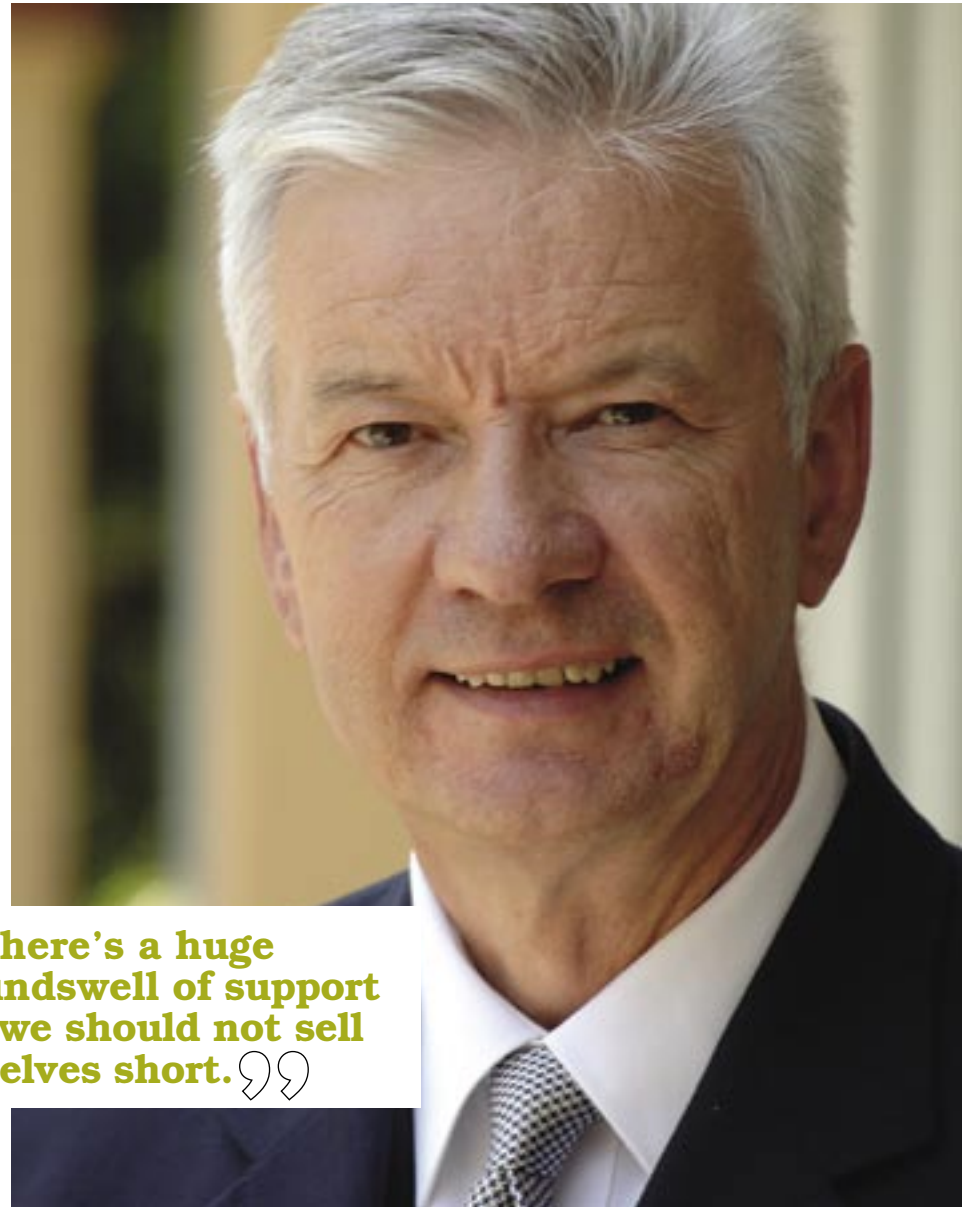


Rallying the groundswell

Doug Cameron has a special reason to have education on his mind as he helps inspire the union movement's Your Rights at Work campaign. **STEVE PACKER** reports.

After 25 years as a full-time union official, two things have refocused Doug Cameron's passion for fighting for workers' rights. The first is what the ACTU vice-president describes as the Howard government's capitulation to big business. The second is his 18-month-old granddaughter, Amy. "We have aspirations for Amy," Cameron told the AEU annual conference in January. "We want her to succeed in the same way as our two daughters, [who] both have degrees and successful careers. But what if Amy is not academically gifted? What if Amy can't be a lawyer, doctor, teacher, rocket scientist or brain surgeon? What if Amy has to work, like many Australians, in a low-paid job? "Under Howard's legislation, she will have no rights. Under Howard's legislation, she will not be treated with respect. Under Howard's legislation, she can be dismissed for operational reasons. Under Howard's legislation, her life will be tougher and less fair. This is unacceptable to me and I know it is unacceptable to you."

Groundswell of support
The balance between economic progress and social progress has become too focused on



PHIL MARTIN

“There’s a huge groundswell of support and we should not sell ourselves short.”

economics, he says in a post-conference interview with *Australian Educator*.

“If we’re talking about productivity, we have to talk about productive performance, which is a wider range of factors. We have to look at poor management in this country—at the skills available, management systems, the logistics of being able to get things when you need them, planning, research, development and innovation.

“If we need to pay more tax, then we need to pay more tax to provide decent infrastructure and training, and decent remuneration for teachers, doctors, nurses and others who really make a big difference to the future of the country. We’ve had 10 years of lost opportunity under the Howard government. We’ve had tax cuts that have not been properly targeted—tax cuts for those who don’t need tax cuts.”

Cameron sees public-private partnerships in infrastructure as one of the dangers for education. “In Europe, no government would for a minute consider trying to educate school children in winter without proper heating in schools. The equivalent for Australia is to provide decent air-conditioned schools and other infrastructure. That should be the responsibility of government and not done under public-private partnerships where the lawyers and the market make a huge killing, and all we’re doing is pushing the costs into the future.

“In my view, more pressure will be created in 10–15 years when governments will still be trying to balance their budgets while paying 15 per cent returns to super funds, including industry funds.” He says public-private partnerships are really a way of pushing away the inevitable decisions government has to make about prioritising funds for the key issues: health and education infrastructure and industry policy.

Sydney-based Cameron says recent visits to Launceston, Albury and Melbourne for ACTU’s Your Rights at Work rallies exposed a “great deal of resentment” against Howard. The union strategy is a combination of industrial activism through rallies, a media campaign and campaigning in marginal seats. “There’s a huge groundswell of support and we should not sell ourselves short.”

Vision and commitment

Cameron, who grew up amid tough working-class politics in Scotland, first joined a union at 15 on leaving school to become a fitter/machinist apprentice. He did shift work in a Scottish steel works before emigrating to Australia, aged 21, with his wife and young daughter and just \$80

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to live on. He became active in Australian unions during seven years at Liddell Power Station in the Hunter Valley, NSW. “We have an opportunity to develop a mixture of Australian, American and European models in this country,” he says. “I find the denigration of the European model, and of anyone with progressive views, a new form of McCarthyism the Howard government is developing. We should not be afraid to stand up for the northern European model, which favours government intervention in the interest of working families, checks and balances against the excesses of big business, and developing a number of values, principles and priorities for ordinary working people.”

He thinks only Labor can do that. “But it must have the vision and commitment, and it should be developing the differentiation between itself and the neo-liberal approach of the conservatives,

which would lead us to the worst aspects of the American system.

“There will be forces within Labor who will want to capitulate to big business. Whether Labor or Liberal wins the election, the campaign will have to continue.”

New career move

Last November, Cameron announced that he would be resigning as national secretary of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union to seek preselection for an ALP senate spot in the next federal election. The transition, although long anticipated in Labor Party circles, has been controversial because it clashes with a push for a younger woman to take the spot.

“I’ve been approached by other unions and senior union officials, and my members have encouraged me to stand for parliament,” Cameron explains. “I’ve been AMWU national secretary for 10 years, and believe that it is time for new ideas and new people to come through. I want to continue to represent working people by pursuing a career in parliament.”

Cameron says Australia needs a more stable Labor Party which can lead the move away from Washington consensus politics, which is all about balanced budgets, free trade and treating workers as part of the economics of a country instead of part of its social structure. ●

STEVE PACKER is *Australian Educator’s* sub-editor.

Resources

- **A full transcript of Doug Cameron’s address to the 2007 AEU annual federal conference can be found at:** www.aeufederal.org.au/Conference2007/index2.html
- **Your Rights at Work campaign:** www.rightsatwork.com.au