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Exit Howard

This year my message is a simple one—the Howard government has got to go. The AEU has carefully reviewed the Howard government's policies and assessed its impact on public education and the state of democracy in Australia. Our conclusion: public education cannot afford another three years of this government.

The massive underfunding of Australia's public education system over the past decade—confirmed by MCEETYA, the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs—is eroding the notion of a 'fair go' for all Australians.

Once an international leader on workers' rights, social welfare, multiculturalism, refugees, and on human rights generally, Australia has now retreated to being a follower, displaying embarrassing levels of sycophancy in its foreign policy.

The Howard government actively uses fear to achieve its political ends, at the cost of social cohesion, inclusion and acceptance. Ten years ago, who would have anticipated the 'children overboard' matter, the fridge magnet campaign encouraging suspicion and reporting, and refugees and their children being detained for lengthy periods in conditions akin to prison camps? The Howard government's treatment of refugees, its 'anti-terrorist' legislation and 'anti-union' legislation—which infringe upon

fundamental freedoms—are further damning examples.

Predictably, under Howard we have seen the circumscribing of the Office of the Status of Women, the Affirmative Action Agency, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and the erosion of provisions in the Race Discrimination Act.

The dismantling of many of the fundamental tenets of our free society, such as habeas corpus, truth in government and ministe-

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rial responsibility, is of increasing concern to all of us—Liberal, ALP, Greens or Democrat voters alike.

In the same way that Howard took Australia into a war with Iraq, blind to its consequences—which are now obvious to all—he also appears blind to the consequences of the broader path he is pursuing in dismantling our public institutions and infrastructure. There is no reason to believe that Howard understands the tension between rampant individualism and democracy, and the need for this to be held in balance.

At the public education conference, Cornerstones, in Sydney last year, leading thinker and visionary John Ralston Saul likened public infrastructure to a very thick mattress upon which all of

us could jump up and down, take risks, succeed or fail and know that the thickness of the mattress would afford us all a degree of protection.

In Australia, this infrastructure included an industrial relations framework that required fairness to be a consideration in tribunal proceedings. Yet, the Orwellian-entitled 'Work Choices' legislation (epitomising Howard's long-held wish to "turn Justice Higgins on his head," as he said in 1983) removes notions of fairness and equity from the workplace.

Since its implementation in March this year, thousands of workers have had their wages cut and their conditions of work eroded. Worker exploitation is now on the rise.

Importantly, the ACTU campaign 'Your Rights at Work'—to which the AEU contributes—continues to build momentum. Recent Newspoll figures show that only 14 per cent of Australians believe that the legislation will be good for them personally, their children or the economy.

This year, with a federal election due anytime from August, the AEU will be lobbying all political parties to come up with public education policies that reverse the damage of the Howard era and do justice to Australia's future.

We are proud to take on this responsibility. ●

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