

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Stark choice in federal poll

The lines have been drawn for the Federal election on education policy. The three opposition parties have announced they will make public education a national priority—the main point for which the AEU and its predecessor organisations have campaigned for over 50 years.

This promises a turnaround in what has become a false division of responsibility between the Commonwealth, for private schools, and the states, for public schools.

Education Minister Brendan Nelson even claimed in Parliament that this division between states and the Commonwealth is holy writ...well, constitutional law at least! In fact, no such law exists, and education is not even mentioned in the Constitution.

Making public education a national priority means that education is no longer a political football. The result of the current poisonous brew of facts and ideology has been more privilege for the privileged. Transparent planning and accountability with fair criteria for public funding would mean better support for public education than in the Howard Government's record.

The fact that the ALP, Greens and Democrats have all made commitments to public education means that they deserve to share the preferential votes of the public education constituency, to the Coalition's detriment—particularly in the Senate.

As the alternative Government, Latham's ALP has publicly committed to more support for public education at all levels, with new policies to address need. Explicit expenditures have been announced for universities, TAFE and a Youth Guarantee for all young people

under 18. For schools, spending commitments were promised early in the election campaign. This is policy of the kind Labor needs to re-establish itself as a party of social reform so absent in recent times.

The Coalition promises more "choice". In fact they have subtitled the new funding Bill "Learning Together Through Choice and Opportunity" in a typically Orwellian mode. But it's the same "choice" that we have seen the Howard Government provide on the establishment of more schools regardless of existing provision, and additional funding to those schools which need it least.

Coalition policy threatens to make public education the residual system for those who cannot afford private education. It is a two-tier policy based on income and exclusion, not "choice" at all.

In the meantime, Nelson successfully used his "cash for flags and physical education" announcements to divert the debate from the essential point that there will be no change to the Coalition funding policy.

While the Federal Minister gets more power to intervene in the affairs of state public education systems using the funding package as a threat, he will not take any more responsibility for providing public education with the resources it needs.

Public Education goes to Canberra

Nelson reiterated this position of "choice through funding" to 250 teachers, parents and students on the AEU's National Lobby Day at

Parliament House in Canberra in June.

The representatives from almost every federal electorate in Australia (as seen on our cover) gathered to lobby their elected representatives for more federal funds for public schools. It was also an opportunity to hear the leaders of the major political parties outline their positions in the lead-up to the federal election.

Leaders of the ALP, Greens and Democrats continued to emphasise the importance of public education and the need for it to be a national priority.

The Greens are placing a great deal of emphasis on public education as a feature of their campaign, along with their more traditional focus on the environment. They plan outright funding increases and a redistribution of public funding from elite private schools as well as increasing teachers' salaries and PD opportunities.

While the Democrats have yet to release their election policy platform, in a recent letter to the AEU, Democrats leader Andrew Bartlett said "funding decisions for government and non-government schools should go beyond simple concepts of 'need' and actively restore confidence in public education as the best education".

The AEU will continue to set public education at the top of the election agenda by lobbying and asking the hard questions of candidates. In the following pages the AEU reports the parties' responses.

But stay tuned: at the ballot box it will be our opportunity as voters to make public education the number one priority. ■

Pat Byrne is the AEU Federal President.



e You can contact Pat Byrne at pbyrne@aeufederal.org.au