

FROM THE PRESIDENT

A watching brief

Pat Byrne is the AEU Federal President.



The years ahead will bring major challenges for supporters of public education in Australia. With the Howard government re-elected with an increased majority, the unfair federal funding model which favours elite private schools continues.

The Coalition was returned despite strong public support for the education funding model proposed by the ALP which sought to ensure that all schools received a national resource standard enabling all students to achieve the National Goals of Schooling. The ALP policy also proposed a return to federal funding of programs targeted at issues of equity, a policy which would have ensured that an additional \$1.9 billion was allocated on the basis of need.

It is essential that the best aspects of that policy are retained; that the ALP does not, in the aftermath of the election result, jettison the principle of a “fair go” which underscores this policy.

The Coalition Government promised an additional \$1 billion in capital works money to schools, with 70 per cent of this to go to government schools, and elite private schools prevented from accessing any of this money.

While all in the education community welcome this additional funding, it is concerning that the proposed process is to bypass established allocative mechanisms in states and territories. This will mean the creation of additional and wasteful bureaucratic processes. It will also have no coordination or planned provision of facilities—again, potentially denying access to the most needy school communities who may not access a submission-based process.

The proposed establishment of Australian Technical Colleges is more problematic.

It is not at all clear how these will operate, other than that they will bypass state education departments and teacher unions, according to the Prime Minister. It seems that business partnerships will be able to tender; as will established government and non-government schools, private and public registered training organisations, universities and other education providers. Colleges will

offer both academic and vocational subjects to students. A major push from the Government will be the introduction of performance pay for teaching staff, with the colleges being “run autonomously by their principals”.

This proposal will undermine both TAFE institutes and secondary schools, particularly in country locations, by again encouraging a drift away from established public institutions. In addition, it will replicate existing structures and facilities instead of using the funds to improve and broaden the existing ones and is a waste of taxpayers’ money.

The Government’s control of the Senate ensures it is able to push forward its industrial relations agenda. This will have a significant impact on those AEU branches/ associated bodies currently within the jurisdiction of the federal industrial relations system.

Teachers may face an industrial dictatorship with right-of-entry provisions targeted, the promotion of individual employment contracts, limits to rights and the content of federal certified agreements, and even a single industrial jurisdiction.

Add to this the requirement that principals be given greater autonomy over school staffing, budgets and education programs, as well as some absurd accountability and reporting requirements. With all this to be linked to the receipt of federal funding, we have a formula for serious conflict in the short to medium term.

The AEU will continue to build alliances both within the education industry and the wider community and to develop strategies to advance the goal of quality public education for all. We need to continue being a visible and credible participant in the entire education debate, in order to properly represent teachers and families who believe in public education as a free, secular and universal system, as well as a broader constituency for whom public education is a cornerstone of democracy. One cannot thrive without the other.



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