



**Pat Byrne**  
AEU Federal President

# Beware the smokescreen

**P**oliticians always have a political agenda and never more so than in the lead-up to an election. So it is with Julie Bishop and her recent interventions into what is being passed off as a curriculum debate.

The Howard government is well aware that it goes into the next election with problems on the IR front, so it must neutralise any areas in which the ALP may have an electoral advantage: traditionally these have been education and health, both of which continue to resonate with voters. To gain any ground, the Coalition must divert attention from the issue of its continued funding of private schools at the expense of the public system.

So it has focused on the equivalent of 'law and order' in education—quality, in this instance represented by old-fashioned standards. Bishop has linked the notion of quality to the nature of the curriculum and is attempting to portray curriculum development as out of control. This allows her to continue the theme, started by Nelson, of the federal government rescuing Australian education by taking control of the curricula and, of course, improving student standards and teacher accountability.

Indeed, Bishop has the gall to say, "the politics of education has moved on from the issue of student/teacher ratios. The new

frontier of educational reform in Australia is about teacher quality and curriculum." Coming from a government which does not employ a single teacher or run a single school, this is a bit rich and represents a blatant rebuttal of the views of teachers and parents.

Asked about where they would like additional education funding to be spent, Australian parents regularly nominate smaller class sizes. In a recent national survey by the AEU, an overwhelming 78 per cent of parents listed smaller class sizes as their first priority. Ninety-six per cent said any additional education funding should be spent in public schools.

While it is essential that we are not sidetracked from the funding issue, it is critical that we pay attention to the curriculum

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debate. Howard and Bishop have made it quite clear that they see no room in the curriculum for analysis, judgment and critical thinking. They pose the argument in simplistic 'either/or' terms which completely overlook the complexities which are the reality of today's classrooms.

Howard and Bishop suggest there is only one choice—facts and figures, or a left-wing, ideologically driven approach. There is no middle ground.

Some journalists have begun trawling through various state and territory curricula documents and publishing anything they see as evidence which proves the central thesis being put forward by the Coalition.

What we are seeing now is:

- tactics designed to intimidate and silence, rather than welcoming a range of viewpoints
- the concentration on negative aspects and results, instead of an honest examination of strengths as well as weaknesses
- fantasy standards from a mythological 'golden age' rather than a vision for the future
- the seeking of political control of the curriculum at the expense of public confidence in schools.

While no-one in the education community denies the need for all children to acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills, we must beware of curriculum options which do not provide for more than 'the basics'. The AEU welcomes any rational and sensible debate on the learning needs of students in the 21st century.

This is not the time for our political leaders to adopt a technical, utilitarian approach to curriculum at the expense of innovation, analysis and creativity, all of which require different skills than learning the basics. To do otherwise is to sell our students short. •

 You can contact Pat Byrne at [pbyrne@aeufederal.org.au](mailto:pbyrne@aeufederal.org.au)