



COERCIVE FEDERALISM

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Taking Over Schools and Turning Back the Clock

Prior to the Howard Government, the Federal Government traditionally supported states and territories to fulfil their constitutional responsibility to provide schooling with financial support and some specific programs targeting equity and national priorities.

However, increasingly the Howard Federal Government has sought to change this relationship and bully the states and territories into doing what it wants by making this funding conditional upon states and territories meeting the demands of the Federal Minister.

At the same time that they have decreased the share of their school funding going to public schools, they have demanded a bigger say in how these schools are run. They provide only 11% of the funding to public schools, but believe this gives them the right to impose their view of how schools should be run on the states and territories.

Not only is this against the spirit of the constitution, which gives responsibility for schools to the states and territories, it has been deleterious for schools in two major ways.

Firstly, it has seen the Federal government seek to impose an old fashioned and ultra conservative agenda on schools.

In his speech “*Australia Rising to the Education Challenge*”¹ John Howard declared that “*in education I’m an avowed*

traditionalist.” Unfortunately what is happening is that his view is being forced on Australian schools without any objective debate and without any considered input from those who have worked in education and schools for many years. The only opinion that counts in determining the future of Australian schools, apparently, is that of the Prime Minister and a few of his colleagues. Whilst other countries are looking at the learning needs of students in the twenty-first century, Australia is busy going back to the 1950’s.

Secondly, as part of pursuing this agenda, the Federal Government has mounted a campaign to undermine confidence in schools. It has become a common occurrence for the Prime Minister or the Minister for Education to make speeches lamenting the standards in schools, suggesting the curriculum has been taken over by left wing radicals, or that teachers are not doing a good job. Despite strong performances in international assessment programs, there is a concerted attempt, backed by the government, to convince the public that students are leaving school unable to read, write or use numbers. Schools we are told, fail to teach values.

What goes on in schools should be determined by the learning needs of students in the twenty-first century, not the out of date views of a backward looking Prime Minister.

¹ Australia Rising to the Education Challenge; address to the Centre for Independent Studies 14th May 2007



*Conditions imposed by then Minister
Brendan Nelson to funding for the 2004-
2008 Quadrennium*

- *Each school must publish a range of performance information covering such matters as staff attendance, teacher qualifications, changes in student results, post-school destinations an so on;*
- *Reporting student attendance;*
- *All states and territories have to commit to develop and implement Statements of Learning*
- *A set of common national tests of all students at Years 3,5,7, and 9.testing standards;*
- *Must implement the National Safe Schools Framework;*
- *There must be at least two hours of physical activity per week in primary and junior secondary schools;*
- *Increase in powers of principals and governing bodies;*
- *Information on students moving interstate ;*
- *Reporting to parents against benchmarks;*
- *Nationally consistent school starting age;*
- *A range of conditions on student reports, including that student achievement be labelled A to E and that they be reported relative to the student's peer group.;*
- *Other conditions such as all schools flying the Australian flag and displaying the Values for Australian Schooling poster.*

*Additional conditions foreshadowed in the
2007 Budget to apply from 2009*

- *Introducing national teacher training and registration standards to improve the skills of new teachers;*
- *Introducing core national standards for curricula in key subjects including English, maths, physics, chemistry, biology and Australian history for Years 11 and 12 and in English, maths, science and Australian history for Year 10;*
- *including external assessment (such as public examinations) as part of Year 12 certificates and common descriptions of levels of achievement;*
- *introducing greater principal autonomy in school management and teacher employment arrangements (including the ability for principals to appoint and dismiss teachers);*
- *introducing performance-based pay for teachers to encourage and reward excellent teaching; and*
- *reporting school and student performance against national benchmarks (including literacy and numeracy results), with school and state comparisons.*

To encourage greater choice within the government school sector, the Australian Government will also encourage the establishment of more selective high schools.