



AEU Parliamentary Brief

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The London Bombings

What kind of society will we be in 10, 20, 30 or 50 years time if we continue down the path of segregation and education by religion, ethnicity and tribe?

Since the London bombings, the steady flow of articles and opinion pieces in the media continue to focus our attention on many issues, not least of which is social policy that contributes to the creation of conditions where such atrocities are committed.

One such opinion piece was written by a British author and social researcher, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown. In her piece she touches on many issues relevant to migrant communities, including the extent to which social dislocation, alienation and disengagement exist at more acute levels amongst second and third generation migrants than with first generation migrants.

Her article about London can apply to many parts of metropolitan Australia. Indeed, the transformation of many suburbs over the course of the last number of decades has given rise to serious concerns.

Three paragraphs in her article which are of particular significance state:

“ when you go into family histories of British Asians you realise that the trend of racial integration in Britain has gone in entirely the opposite direction to what we expected – the first generation felt less agitated than the third does; in some ways in the `50s and `60s there was more real interaction between Muslim incomers and white society.

In those early days of mass migration the racism was dreadful, but migrants never allowed it to wreck their sense of self worth.

In the factories, workers of all backgrounds related to each other, formed a bond. But those factories disappeared; housing and schools got more segregated, desolation and separatism set in”.

These three paragraphs particularly focus our attention on social policy in general and education policy in particular.

Ms Alibhai-Brown's reference to schools becoming ever more segregated is, in this context, a chilling reminder of the effect of education policy by successive Australian federal and state governments. At one end of the spectrum this policy contributes to increasingly segregated schools as a result of the residualisation of public schools caused by shifts in enrolment patterns.

At the other end of the spectrum there is further separatism resulting from state-sponsored segregation in the form of private schools, including ethno-religious schools.

During these difficult and complex times, it is incumbent upon us to engage in these critical debates and strongly reassert the view that the key to a vibrant multicultural democracy is an inclusive local socially representative public education system.

We must continue to assert that if Australia can be described as a tolerant and cohesive multicultural society, it is the result of 150 years of public education and the common experience shared by the overwhelming majority of Australians.

Public Education and University Success

A study by Monash University, released earlier this year, has confirmed findings – going back as far as 1985 – that students from comprehensive public schools are doing better at the end of their first year of university than those from private or selective schools.

Ian Dobson and Eric Skuja looked at the results of 12,500 students at Monash University between 2000 and 2003. They found that, in many cases, public school students had university entrance scores five marks lower than those from private and selective schools, yet outperformed them in university studies.

It appears that the advantage enjoyed by secondary school students from private/selective schools in relation to exam success evaporated in the first year at university. While further research is necessary to determine the reasons for this, it is possibly because they no longer had access to the previously high level of resources devoted to their education at those schools.

The research confirms earlier findings from Monash University in 1985; two studies from Western Australia; and one from Britain. All consistently reported that students from public schools performed better at university than their private school counterparts. The WA studies found that, among students with the same entry scores, those from government schools outperformed those from Catholic schools with the Catholic students outperforming those from Independent schools. The British study found that students from the government sector were more likely to get a good degree than similar students with similar A-Level grades from Independent schools.

The most recent Monash study can be found in *People and Place*, vol.13, no.1, 2005, pp53 – 62.

IR, students and work

The Federal Government's Industrial Relations agenda will change the environment in which young Australians first experience the world of paid work. Secondary and tertiary students entering the workforce for the first time, often as casual workers in supermarkets, fast food franchises, etc, will find themselves at the sharp end of the new laws.

These are already pretty tough workplaces, with inconvenient hours, low wages and short notice of roster changes. But currently there are factors which generally prevent the worst forms of exploitation: an employer knows that if they are too rough on their workers, they may be taken to the Industrial Relations Commission by the union, or may have to defend their actions at unfair dismissal proceedings; and workers have the right to negotiate for improved pay and conditions through collective agreements.

AWAs

Under the new laws, most young workers will be given no choice but to accept individual "Australian Workplace Agreements" (AWAs) which will sign away their right to the benefit of any collective agreement. Currently an AWA is subject to any collective agreement that is in place at the workplace, and must at least be as good as the award. Under the new laws, the AWA will *completely replace* the collective agreement, even if it undercuts pay and conditions.

Minimum conditions

AWAs will no longer have to meet any meaningful standard. They will only have to include the five minimum conditions set down by law:

- unpaid **parental leave**;
- 8 days **sick leave**;
- 4 weeks **annual leave** (with 2 weeks able to be "traded off");
- **ordinary hours** not to exceed 38 per week (but NOT a limit on hours actually worked, and no guarantee of penalty rates for the 39th hour or after);
- a minimum **adult hourly rate** – currently \$12.75 per hour – with lower junior rates.

Of course, most students work as casuals, in which case they would not usually be entitled to *any* paid leave. So would only the last two minimum standards have to be met for a casual AWA to pass the test?

Unfair dismissals

Most of the places where students typically work employ less than 100 employees. They will be excluded from unfair dismissal rights.

The dynamics of workplaces will change when employers need no longer worry that arbitrary, harsh or mean behaviour could be called to account at an unfair dismissal hearing. While many employers will not take advantage of this, bad bosses will be "let off the leash". This change actually licenses employers to be *unfair*.

So if a person is sacked because the boss just doesn't like them, or because they've decided to give the job to someone who barracks for a different football team, there will be little they can do about it. Such dismissals are not unlawful, just completely unfair.

Learning about work

With no real choice but AWAs, and with no rights to contest unfair dismissals, young workers will be more than ever at the mercy of their employers' unreasonable demands. Pressure to put in unpaid overtime and to work during exam weeks could become the norm. By removing the safeguards which prevent bad employers from abusing their workers, these new laws will place inexperienced and casual workers at the most risk.

This new, harsher work environment will be a “learning experience” for working students: one where they may not learn some of the important lessons of working life – respect for human dignity, the right to a proper work/life balance, solidarity and collective negotiation to improve conditions.

Working students *will* learn how easy it is to lose the gains of a century, as conditions won by our parents and grandparents are simply not available to our children. It is a harsh lesson for us all.

More information about the new industrial relations laws can be found at www.rightsatwork.com.au.

42,000 children still missing out on preschool education

An AEU analysis of the data contained in the 2005 *Report on Government Services* shows that children’s access to preschool education still depends too much on who they are and where they live.

In 2003-04, 83.7% of children in Australia attended preschool in the year before school.

At least 42,000 children are still missing out on a preschool education, despite the fact that preschool enrolments and participation rates are increasing.

About 15,000 three and four year old Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are missing out on a preschool education. The participation rate for four year old Indigenous children is 57.5% compared to a national average of 83.7%.

Children from regional and remote areas and children with disabilities are also more likely to be missing out on preschool education. The 2004 Independent National Inquiry into Preschool Education reported barriers to access for children with special needs as a major concern.

NSW now spends less than any other system on preschool education and Victoria is the second lowest spender. These states separate preschool from other education sectors and expect parents to pay often substantial fees. NSW spends 56.5% of the national average on total children’s services, while Victoria spends 75.1% of the national average.

The Government seems to have gone quiet on the National Agenda for Early Childhood. MCEETYA is developing a work programme on early childhood education and we will keep you informed.

The AEU report and media release can be accessed at <http://www.aefederal.org.au/Ec/index2.html>

Skilling Australia’s Workforce Bill 2005

This and the accompanying Repeal bill are back in the Senate on Tuesday 16 August.

The AEU submission to the Senate inquiry supported the ACTU submission and emphasised the issues raised by the legislation for TAFE and for public education. The submission is available on the Senate committee site and at www.aefederal.org.au

In urging that the Bill be opposed or at the least amended, the AEU addressed in some detail the following major problems:

1. Efforts to shift ownership and control from an inclusive, industry-led model based on collaboration, to one which is unreasonably dominated by the Commonwealth Government, will jeopardise the continued development of a national vocational education and training system.
2. The attempt to impose an ideologically driven and arbitrary industrial relations agenda through conditional funding will not only undermine the industrial rights of employees but threaten the maintenance of a highly qualified TAFE teaching profession.
3. Imposition of a strengthened and expanded focus on marketisation and privatisation will undermine the public TAFE system that is the backbone of the national system and further threaten the quality of VET outcomes.
4. The failure to provide significant additional resources to meet unmet demand, fund enrolment growth and to redress the impact of the resource pressures imposed by the Federal Government since 1996 will continue to constrain the capacity and quality of the system and tend to distort delivery into less expensive rather than more needed areas of training.

The AEU supports the concerns of Opposition Senators about the failure to hold a hearing.

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Fuelling the crisis

“ Brendan Nelson’s portrayal of himself as the saviour of education standards should be of concern to those committed to strong, quality, public education systems.

His appropriation of the role of keeper of improved standards is part of the federal government’s long-term strategy of achieving a user-pays education system. It is well served by the new accountability requirements that have been attached to federal funding.

Under the guise of ‘choice’, the first part of that strategy has seen the shameless redirection of public funds from government schools to non-government schools, without regard for accumulated wealth or the level of fees charged and, in the process, redefining ‘need’ as ‘entitlement’.

The second phase of the strategy is to create and sustain a view that government school education is in crisis.

Nelson continually downplays success stories such as Australia’s performance in international assessment programs. He actively fosters the view that our teachers and schools are failing.

He has generated a raft of inquiries, investigations and reviews aimed at creating and reinforcing an image of a profession in disarray. In doing so, he has placed much of the blame on state governments in a bid to generate community concern and further increase the number of students enrolling in private schools.

As the American educator Alfie Kohn puts it: “Those proponents of a narrowly defined top down standard and coercive pressure type

of accountability have no interest in improving the schools which struggle to meet these requirements. For them, public education is not something which should be made better; it is something from which to be freed.”

Nelson repeatedly implies that parents who send their children to public schools somehow care less about them than those who ‘make sacrifices’ to get a private school education.

The implicit message of the government’s voucher system for parents of students who fail literacy and numeracy benchmarks is that

Nelson actively fosters the view that our teachers and schools are failing.

their schools are not to be trusted. Instead of improving funding to schools that need it most, the government would rather put public money into the pockets of private individuals and companies without any accountability requirements.

The moves towards micro-management in education, as seen in the specific requirements now attached to federal government funding, largely ignore factors such as student background and the accumulation of disadvantage in some schools. They cut across innovation, diversity and quality relationships and are the antithesis of what is required for successful

participation in the modern world.

They are the first steps towards the introduction of a ‘failing schools’ policy, such as we see in the UK and the US, which declares schools to be ‘failing’ based on student test performances.

As educators, we know that an early casualty of this policy is quality teaching and learning, as more and more schools focus on passing the tests to the detriment of a broad and varied curriculum. The consequence of this is a two-tiered education system, with some schools preoccupied with basic skills, and those serving more affluent communities free to enjoy art, music and literature studies.

Having created and encouraged a view of education in crisis, Nelson must, of course, be seen to have the solution. What this has meant in the UK and US has been the mandating of simplistic solutions, such as requiring a particular reading method to be employed by all teachers, irrespective of the needs of the students they teach. In the lead up to the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy, Nelson has already flagged his preference for a ‘phonics for all’ approach. This could become a requirement attached to next year’s funding...and who knows what else?

It is safe to assume that Nelson’s funding requirements will undermine teacher professionalism, punish teachers and students, and reduce the quality of what is currently happening in schools. ■ ”

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