

# Public Education for social justice and human rights

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n her address to 2006 AEU Federal Conference, held in Brisbane in January,

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suggested that the theme of 'public education for social justice and human rights' is particularly pertinent as we find ourselves in the midst of the greatest period of social and political change since Australia's federation. This is an edited summary of her speech.

The very model of federalism enshrined in our constitution is under threat from a coalition government unwilling to deal with state and territory Labor governments and eager to wipe out every skerrick of social and political progress.

As expected, Howard has wasted no time in using his Senate majority. An astonishing number of bills have been rushed through with scant, if any, regard for proper scrutiny or debate. The last weeks of parliamentary sittings in 2005 have changed the Australian social and political landscape like no others.

In the WorkChoices debate, senators had the equivalent of seven seconds per amendment to consider, prepare and respond to the 337 minor government amendments which were proposed; other amendments did not see the light of day. This particular example of outright contempt for democracy followed the 15 November protests in which well over half a million Australians took to the streets.

Howard has made quite clear his view that any job is better than none, no matter how bad the pay or how bad the conditions. So it is no surprise that Welfare to Work legislation removes the capacity of single parents to choose to remain at home to raise their children.

In education, Brendan Nelson continued his assault on teachers and on public education throughout 2005.

Universities have been the first to feel the brunt of the workplace laws with funding now subject to the offering of AWAs. TAFE colleges are also in the firing line, both by way of the funding conditions and the fact that most are likely to be roped into the federal system by virtue of the corporate status of their employers.

The Skilling Australia Workforce Act, as well as undermining the working conditions of TAFE teachers through the link to funding, imposes far greater commonwealth control over the directions of the national VET system, while failing to address the critical resource needs of the sector.

In schools, Nelson has continued his pattern of denigrating teachers. He has also flagged a national Year 12 certificate, initially building on existing state and territory certificates but with some common components.

There is no doubt that we are heading towards a one size fits all, quick-fix model no matter how much the Minister professes to support diversity and local solutions: quick fixes such as no assistance until students fail Year 3 benchmark testing; no school, no welfare payments.

In the National Institute for Quality Teaching and School Leadership Institute, the Minister now has his own body to run the Coalition's agenda for teachers – one of individualising the profession

by focussing on individual teacher accountability through professional standards.

We should not underestimate the consequences of the interaction between such a model and the testing/quality agenda which is also being imposed on our schools.

For teachers the increased prescription as to what and how to teach will reduce the role of the teacher to that of a technician; to see teaching as simply a tick the box exercise addressing basic outcomes.

2005 also saw a magnificent campaign by Australian unions against the industrial relations changes. Opinion polls are showing that this is a vote changing issue. It will be up to us as community members and unionists to make sure that it remains so until the next election. Keeping the momentum going will not be easy in an environment increasingly characterised by intimidation and fear.

This government has shown that it has no regard for free speech when that speech is critical of its agenda. We saw the Anti-Terrorism bill pass despite the fact that it strips away hard won rights to freedom of speech and of association and allows persons to be held in custody without charge and without the capacity to inform anyone of their whereabouts either during or after the event.

Freedom of speech when it supports a government viewpoint is, of course, encouraged no matter how offensive it may be. In the aftermath of the Cronulla riots John Howard steadfastly maintained that there was not an element of racism involved. 2005 also saw further outrageous breaches of human rights by our Immigration Department whose capacity to create entirely new and arbitrary categories of people in order that they can be deported continues to amaze anyone with a modicum of human decency.

This then is the environment in which we will be operating in the foreseeable future. Those public institutions most dear to us—those which are underpinned by notions of fairness, equality of opportunity and social justice—are all under threat from the changes which have been introduced.

We in the AEU remain committed to working towards a decent and humane Australia. As teachers and leaders in our union and in our communities, it is imperative that we continue to speak out and encourage others to do the same; to remind us of the fundamental purposes of unionism and education in a free society. ♦

*This speech can be found in full at*  
<http://www.aeufederal.org.au/Conference2006/index2.html>



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