



from the president

Linda Simon, Federal President of the TAFE Division of the AEU

Federal Election Questions

The *War on Democracy*, John Pilger's latest film, was previewed in Sydney on 16 September. It is about the struggle for democratic government in Latin American and South American countries in the main, with a focus on Venezuela.

However, the audience afterwards was most interested in asking Pilger about his views on the attack on civil liberties in this country, with the lock-down of Sydney only the weekend before and the unwarranted violence by some members of the police against innocent people.

This discussion highlighted the concern apparent amongst many Australians as to whether the democratic principles, civil liberties and commitment to public services and infrastructure that they believe are part of the Australian way of life, will be any different whichever party is in power after the Federal Election. That the Sydney lock-down and loss of civil liberties could happen under a State Labor Government makes this matter of even greater concern. So too does the recent Rudd announcement of its industrial relations policy 'Forward with Fairness'. Many fear that this policy suggests a Rudd government could step back from its commitments to "tear up Workchoices" and instead pander to the concerns of big business rather than the needs of working people.

And what of education? The AEU launched its TAFE Claim on 31 August at Ryde College in the Prime Minister's seat of Bennelong. The claim is for an additional \$470 million in 2008, increasing annually to 2011, to meet projected needs in vocational education and training. The claim is very reasonable, recognising the need for additional funding in recurrent or system growth based on recognised research, the need for a national review of buildings, equipment and infrastructure, a quality improvement fund for teaching issues and a summit around student issues.

Whilst a reasonable claim, it is also comprehensive, addressing those four important areas: growth, capital works, our teachers and our students. These areas may seem self-evident, but when did we last hear governments addressing them in

such a way? Of concern to us all is the piecemeal approach to vocational education and training that has been taken by the current Federal Government, with no apparent desire to ensure all the elements of a quality system of vocational education and training in this country are included in policy and funding commitments.

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And where was the Prime Minister on this day of the TAFE Claim launch? At an Australian Technical College in Victoria! This interesting sequence of events appears to demonstrate very clearly where the priorities of the Howard government sit in relation to public education. Senator Kerry Nettle from the Greens was the only politician who was apparently able to attend, and in a media release afterwards she said:

The Greens see the AEU's funding request as a necessary first step and call on whoever forms government after the election to invest even more in TAFE... The Greens will use our position in the Senate after the next election to ensure that public education gets the urgent funding boost it deserves. The Australian TAFE system is the envy of the world and any sensible federal government would prioritise investment in TAFE to underpin Australia's vibrant economy and culture.

The commitment from the Greens, and their support of the TAFE sector in the Senate, is an important matter that all TAFE teachers and students need to recognise at voting time.

The AEU continues to meet with Stephen

Smith, Shadow Minister for Education and Training, and he has visited a few TAFE Institutes with local Federal Members. We understand that there will be a TAFE announcement during the election campaign proper, but he has, at this stage, provided us with the following statement:

Over the past 11 long years, investment in TAFE has been very seriously neglected by the Howard Government. There is a crucial need for greater investment in TAFEs, which remain the single largest provider of vocational education and training in Australia. This needs to be both a recurrent investment and an infrastructure investment to upgrade inadequate and out-of-date infrastructure and equipment to ensure our apprentices and trainees are working on industry relevant equipment.

As well, the ageing of our secondary and post secondary vocational education and training workforce is fast presenting us with a workforce and teaching crisis.

Federal Labor's starting point for vocational education and training is that the Commonwealth, states, territories, industry and training providers, including TAFE, must all work cooperatively to enhance our national training and skills effort.

In the flurry of announcements and spending of money during the campaign, we need to ensure that TAFE does not fall off the agenda. But the aftermath of the elections will be just as important, even if a Rudd Labor government is elected. We will need to keep campaigning to ensure that we have fair industrial relations laws that recognise the roles of unions and the rights of workers to collectively bargain, organise and act! We will need to keep campaigning to ensure not just that a Federal Labor government recognises TAFE as the largest VET provider, but also as the best!

And we will need to keep campaigning to ensure that our civil liberties and rights are not undermined, and that the 'war on democracy' does not apply in Australia. ❖