



from the president

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

# Reflections of a

**W**HEN the Rudd Government won office at the end of 2007, we in TAFE looked forward to a new era — one characterised by vastly improved Federal/State relations, a strong industrial relations system that protected workers, and government support for public education, including TAFE. It has not even been a year yet, but the Rudd Government appears to be failing on all these fronts.

The Prime Minister and Premiers may laud the COAG process, but the reality is that there are a lot of 'secret' discussions occurring that are not open to stakeholders or able to be scrutinised by other interested politicians. The Productivity Agenda Working Group (PAWG) represents the worst of all these secretive processes. Finding out what is being proposed as part of the 'market design' principles relating to the funding agreements is like 'pulling teeth'. It appears, however, that the current government is no better than the previous one in expecting states and territories to conform

to ideological positions and to implement certain reforms in exchange for funding. With the Howard Government it was AWAs, with the Rudd Government it is a truly competitive training market.

The support of the Deputy Prime Minister for the changes adopted by the Victorian Government, in making all their funding contestable and in increasing TAFE fees and implementing Fee-HELP, is clear from her recent speeches at a range of conferences.

Intensive lobbying of Federal politicians has been taking place through the Branches and the AEU centrally, and it is interesting to reflect on the responses from our representatives in Canberra. One of the most obvious factors, unfortunately, is their lack of knowledge, and one of our main challenges has been in creating an atmosphere of concern that will lead MPs to question and criticise. Slowly this appears to be happening. We do have a number of educationalists in Parliament, and even a few ex-TAFE teachers or

managers. One of the chief messages to be raised with them is the questioning of the rationale for believing that a competitive training market, one underpinned by putting TAFE Institutes and private providers on an even footing in relation to access to funding and government facilities, will deliver the outcomes the government wants.

The Rudd Government claims that it has two main agendas in this area. The first is to address skills shortages and the second is a social inclusion agenda, of which the productivity training places for jobseekers is an example. When put on the spot, most politicians recognise the problems. They acknowledge that many unemployed and under-employed people require language, literacy and numeracy support and development of basic skills, together with vocational qualifications, and they acknowledge the critical role that TAFE plays in second chance and further education. Politicians love the transformational case studies, especially if they relate to people in their electorates. And



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# Lobbyist!

they also recognise that private providers, who operate as for-profit businesses, are unlikely to be interested in operating in these areas.

Recent meetings with Federal politicians have challenged them to provide the evidence that a competitive training market, as being promoted by the Rudd Government, will deliver quality outcomes for students, community and industry. There is no evidence that this will happen, and we need to keep focussing their attention on what Australia stands to lose — a strong quality public TAFE system.

Meetings with the opposition parties are always interesting, especially with members of the National Party. They recognise the importance of TAFE colleges to the economic health and well-being of country towns. It is amazing the number of meetings that we have participated in where politicians have expressed concerns about loss of courses in rural areas and the problems of young people travelling hundreds of kilometres on

country roads to attend a TAFE college away from home.

Politicians recognise the importance and value of TAFE and they recognise how critical it is that Australia addresses its skills shortages in technical and professional areas — so what is it they don't get?

We, as educationalists in public TAFE colleges and workplaces, need to keep reinforcing the messages to Federal politicians and keep suggesting ways in which they can intervene and raise concerns about the current agenda. We have suggested the need for inquiries and reviews of current policies, which even at this early stage of the life of the Labor Government are clearly a dismal failure, and overall we have asked them to make their concerns public — to ask the questions in Parliament, to make speeches and to oppose the attacks on public education. I think this is not too much to expect! ❖

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